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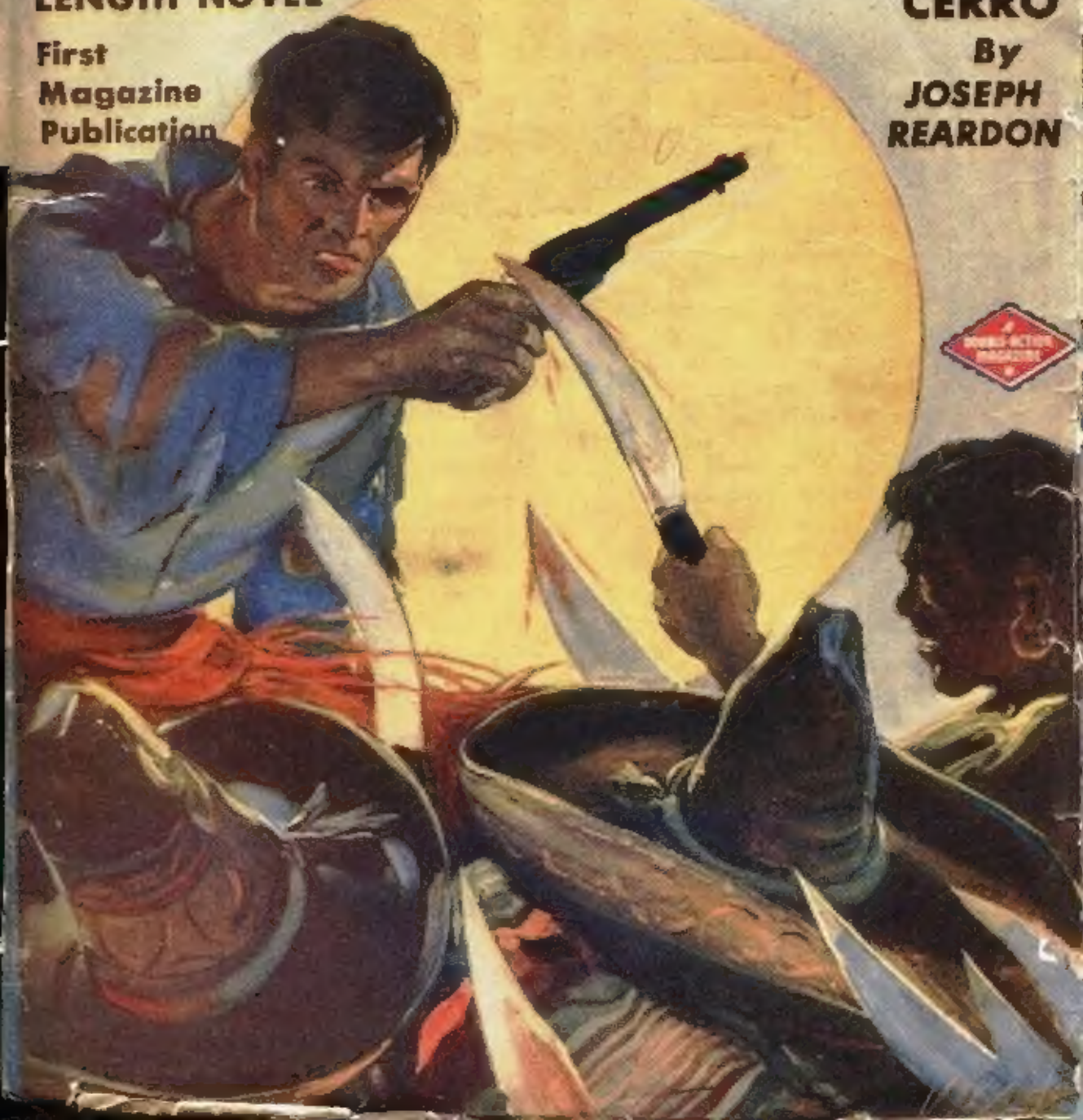
COMPLETE BOOK-LENGTH NOVEL

First Magazine Publication

GUNSLICK FROM CERRO

By JOSEPH REARDON



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COMPLETE COWBOY WILD WESTERN STORIES

Volume 5 ★ Winter, 1945 ★ Number 6

ACTION-PACKED BOOK-LENGTH NOVEL

(First Magazine Publication)

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Ed Brady's reputation as a gunhand was a damning thing when the Sheriff of Cochetopa Valley found him at the scene of a particularly brutal murder. Because, while Ed was a gunslick, those who spread the story around had carefully neglected to add that his guns were always on the side of law and order, and that he'd never smoked down a man unless that hombre drew first. So now, instead of the peaceful life Ed hoped for when he bought his ranch, there was nothing but a continuation of his past, bullet-marked trail, and a price on his head to boot!

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A fact article of the West.

Cover by H. W. Scott *Robert W. Lowndes, Editor*

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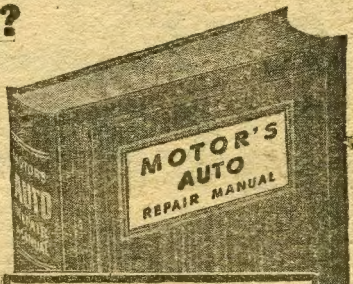

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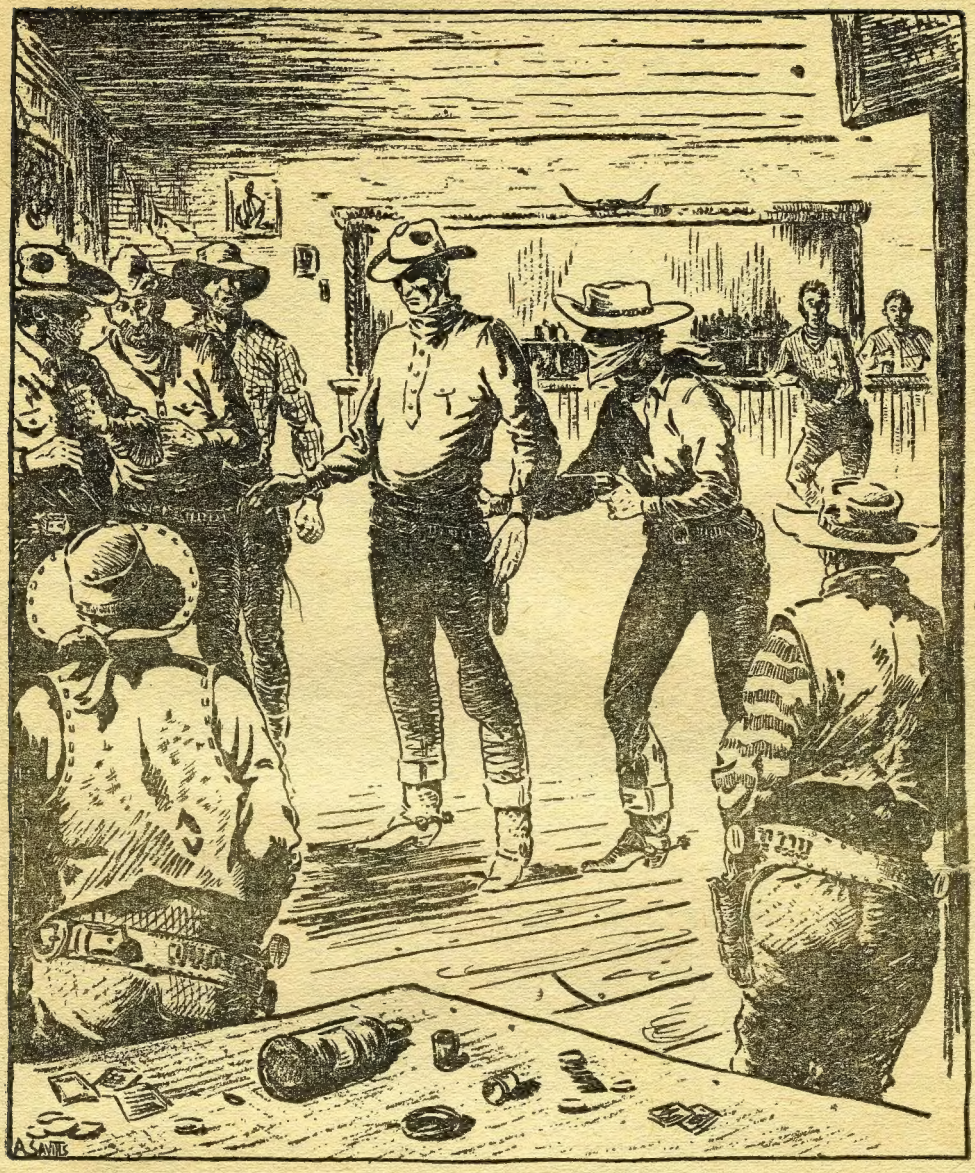
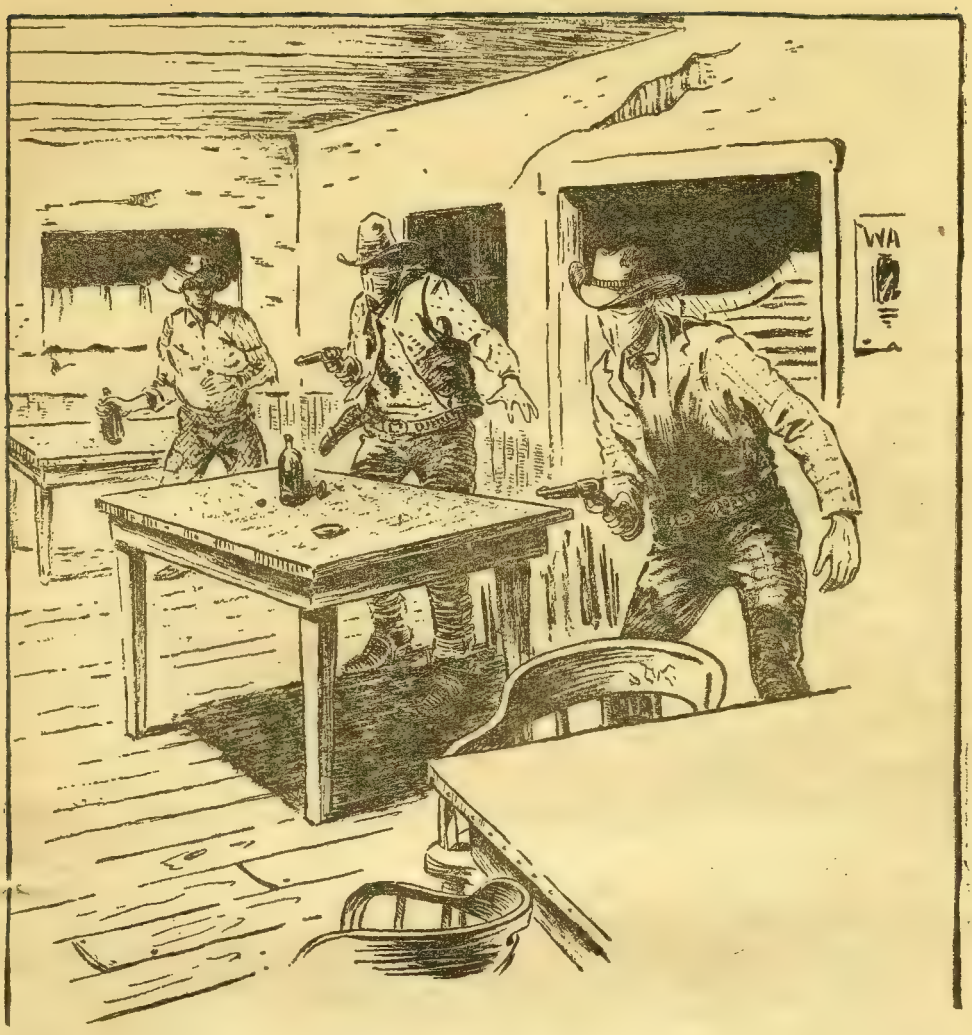


GUNSLICK FROM CERRO

First Magazine Publication of This Complete Book-Length Novel

By JOSEPH REARDON



"You're coming with us, Brady," said the masked man, as his two aides covered the room.

Ed Brady had nine notches on his gun, but they were all for outlaws who'd drawn against him first. But now that Ed wanted to settle down, he found his reputation as a gunslick had preceded him, and that the depradations of lobos in Cochetopa Valley, where he was making his new home, were being laid at Brady's door!

CHAPTER I

TALL men stood laughing and drinking at the bar; men who, by their talk and manner were old and trusted friends.

From the heart of the group the brick-colored head of Ed Brady protruded, poking its way between the tops of his friends' high sombreros.

"This round is on me, boys," he was calling.

"Nothing doing, me bucking beauty," shouted Jim Donlan. "Your

money's no good tonight. This is your party, but we're paying the bills. Ain't I right boys?"

Cries of "Right," "You said it," and "Rope him if he gets fractious," drowned out Brady's attempts to pay his share.

"Your share of the evenin's entertainment is to make a speech," went on Donlan.

"I ain't no good at speechifying," protested Brady.

The little group took up Donlan's idea, and shouts of "Speech" were dinning in Brady's ears.

Color flowed into his face and neck, making them almost match his red thatch. He held up his hands for silence, then said, "All right; if you want a speech, here it is. I got me my ranch on the Cochetopa because I want to settle down in peace, but I'm agonna miss you boys sompin' awful every minute of the time."

"Is that all?" asked Donlan.

"Ain't that enough? It's the first speech I ever made."

"Naw," snorted his friend disgustedly. "That's only the beginning of a speech. It might do if we was all cold sober, but remember we been celebratin' for nigh on to three hours. You'll have to do better'n that."

"Gentlemen, allow me."

A curious figure had pushed his way forward and stood between Brady and Donlan. He was about half the height of the others, but twice as large around. He was built in the form of a short, squat beer keg. A week's growth covered his jowls and chin with a heavy layer of bristle, and his clothes could have been much cleaner without attracting undue attention. A quick glance would dismiss him as a beery derelict, but closer observation, especially of his sharp, humorous eyes, would indicate there was more to this man than appeared on the surface.

"It's the Judge," said Donan, using the only name by which the disreputable looking old man was known. "What is it, Judge?"

"Ahem!" The Judge cleared his throat judicially. "I heard you calling upon my friend Ed Brady for a speech. I'm sure he would rather face a dozen owl-hooters than have to make a speech. Ed is a man of action, not words. On the other hand, not being much good at action, words are what I excel at. Therefore, gentlemen, if you will allow me, I shall make the speech instead of Brady."

Ed gave him a grateful pat on the back. "Thanks, Judge," he said. "I'm mighty grateful to you."

"You shall soon have a chance of proving it," said the Judge. "But now get me something to stand on. I can't speak from 'way down here."

In a minute they had him standing on a chair and were awaiting his words.

THE Judge looked over the crowd then over the bar. Standing within arm's reach was a drink which someone had momentarily left. The old man calmly reached out his hand, took the glass, and with one quick jerk of his head tossed it down his throat. Then he wiped his sleeve across his mouth and began.

"Gentlemen," he said, "tonight we lose one of Cerro's finest citizens. There are some who would say that Ed Brady has not always walked the straight and narrow path, that there have been slight deviations in his conduct at which we should look with suspicion. And I answer that if the law had been honest in Cerro, it wouldn't have been necessary for Ed to take it into his own hands.

I have heard my friend called a killer. Gentlemen—the men Ed Brady has killed all deserved to be killed, every gosh-blasted one of them. They had been robbing the poor and distressed, the widows and orphans who had no man to fight for them.

"But Ed Brady fought for them—and won for them. And what did he profit from his noble deeds? Was he exalted as a hero? Only by us who knew him well, and by the poor and weak whom he so nobly helped. The rich and mighty conspired to destroy him. They labeled him a notorious gunman and spread that reputation throughout the Southwest.

"Now Ed Brady is leaving us. He will be missed. But he will live on

at Cerro, for the lessons he taught here will not soon be forgotten.

"As for myself"—the Judge paused —"this is as good a time as any to tell you my future plans. I have grown tired of the fleshpots of Cerro and seek a peaceful and quiet life. Therefore I shall ride with Ed Brady to the Cochetopa country and there take up my abode and be his friend and counsellor."

The rotund little man stepped down amid cheers and roars of approval.

"You sure got a silver tongue, Judge," said Donlan. But the Judge was already at the bar awaiting the next round.

Ed Brady pushed his way toward him.

"What's this talk about you riding with me?" he asked.

The Judge looked up with innocent eyes. "Just that, Ed. I want to get away from Cerro—and from all bars. They're too much temptation for me. I want to make a try at becoming a man again."

Ed snorted. "You'd find a bottle if it was hid a hundred miles out on the desert and covered by fifty feet of drifting sand. And as soon as you'd found it, you'd finish every last drop and lick the cork and then go hell-bent for trouble. And I'd have to go chasing all through the Cochetopa hills looking for you to get you out of whatever mess you got yourself into. No," he finished flatly. "Nothing doing. You stay here."

"You been good to me, Ed." The Judge's voice was pleading. "You got me out of plenty of scrapes and saved me from becoming a complete washout. Just this one last favor is all I'll ever ask. It'll put me on my feet again."

BRADY felt the tug of this old man's desires at his heart strings, but he had known the Judge for many years, if he was to have peace and quiet at his new home, there could be no room there for this liquor-ridden guzzler.

"Sorry, Judge," he replied firmly, "but that's about the only favor I can't do for you."

The Judge did not answer, for he was looking past Brady intently—looking with something akin to horror in his eyes.

Ed Brady saw the look and wheeled quickly, hand clawing for gun as he turned, but before he got completely around he felt cold steel pressing into his side.

"Drop yore hand," said a raucous voice.

Ed dropped his hand and completed his turn to get a look at the newcomers.

There were three of them. Two had thrown their guns on Ed's friends, the third had his hogleg pressed to Ed's ribs. All wore their neckerchiefs up over their faces and, though it was impossible to tell who they were, it was simple to see that they were not Cerro stock. Outside gunnies, come to town to do a job.

Ed's voice was soft and smooth when he spoke.

"I think you're making a mistake, boys," he said. "This is a private party, and we don't hanker for no gun play."

The man who had him covered laughed hoarsely. "This ain't no mistake. There ain't many guys fit yore description. Six foot two, red curly hair, blue eyes, about two hunnert pounds. Yore the lobo we want, all right. Yore name is Ed Brady, ain't it?"

"That," said Ed, stalling for time, for from the corner of his eye he had seen a surreptitious movement of the Judge's hand, "depends on what you want Ed Brady for."

Again the raucous laugh from the gunman.

"Why, we got a present for him and we want to be sure that he gets it," he sneered. Then his voice turned hard. "Come on, Brady. Quit stallin'. Yore comin' with us. Get movin'."

The gun pressed harder into Ed's ribs.

Faced by the open guns of the other two, his friends stood helpless, swearing to themselves.

ONLY the Judge had been ignored by the gunmen. He packed no gun himself, and his insignificant appearance made him seem harmless.

But Ed had been right when he thought he saw a movement of the Judge's arm. That arm had reached over to the bar and, as though from long habit, the hand had closed around the long neck of an almost full bottle of rye.

Ed Brady was just saying, "All right, boys, no use shooting the place up. I'm Ed Brady," when the Judge's hand, holding that bottle, moved. This was no surreptitious move but a wide, full swing. The arm heaved with all the power in the Judge's old frame, and the bottle went flying through the air toward the center arc light, the only source of illumination at the bar.

For a fraction of a second the man who had Brady covered allowed his glance to be attracted to that dark object hurtling through the air. That fraction of a second was enough, for Ed's left hand pushed the gun out of his ribs, and his right lashed out at his opponent's face. His fist exploded on something that seemed to crack.

At the same moment there was a crash of glass as bottle met light and complete darkness enveloped the room.

Pandemonium broke loose. Red and orange streaks of flame cut through the darkness, but there were not many shots, for Ed's friends feared to use their guns because of the possibility of hitting one of their own crew.

The invading gunnies were not so particular and shot at random. But they no longer had the advantage of having the drop on the boys. In the dark they were at a disadvantage, for they were outnumbered and would be rounded up or cut down one at a time.

They knew that to stay would prove fatal, so they chose flight, making a break for the swinging bat-wing door and gaining their horses before the boys could get out from behind the bar and the tables which they had pulled over to use as breastworks.

The boys heard their horses go galloping up the street, and Ed Brady called out, "Anybody hurt by their fire?"

"Jest a little nick here," answered Jim Donlan. "Nothing serious. Anybody else hit?"

Voices answered back and forth in the darkness, but it was plain that the only real damage done was the destruction of the light. That was soon repaired, and the boys went to congratulate the Judge for his quick thinking and accurate aim.

They found him with a long and mournful face.

"What's the matter, Judge?" asked Ed anxiously. "You been hit?"

The Judge shook his head sorrowfully.

"No, not that," he replied. "Something much worse."

"Worse? What is it?" they demanded.

"The bottle," the Judge sadly replied. "The bottle I threw at the light."

"What about the bottle?"

"It was practically a full quart," the Judge explained, "and good rye, too. Mount Vernon. That's the first time I had a full bottle of Mount Vernon in my hands in years. They been feeding me rotgut and hogwash at the bar. And when I finally get my hands on a full bottle of Mount Vernon, what do I do with it? I throw it away! I broke it! Boys, I am inconsolable."

Amid hilarious laughter, the boys decided that the Judge's great sacrifice should not have been in vain. They got a fresh bottle of Mount Vernon from the bar and lifted the rolypoly old man over to one of the tables, where they sat him down with the bottle and a glass before him.

"This is for me?" he faltered. "All for me?"

"All for you," they replied.

He picked up the glass and tossed it away.

"Glasses!" he snorted. "A prehistoric way of drinking. No civilized man would deprive himself of the cool heavenly gurgle as the nectar drains from the neck of the bottle into his waiting parched throat."

"Drink it however you want," laughed Brady. "You've earned it, and more."

But instead of taking the huge gulp they had expected him to, the

Judge slapped the cork back into the bottle and said, "If you don't mind, I won't drink it right now. I want to look at it for a while first."

"Anything you say, Judge," they answered. "It's your party."

They left him at the table fondling the bottle lovingly, and went back to the bar to have another round for themselves.

JIM DONLAN spoke the thought that was in many minds.

"Ed, I know you got your mind made up to go, but I'm thinking it would be much safer for you to stay on in Cerro for a while."

Brady didn't even answer. He just shook his head.

"Those three hombres are the least of it, Ed," insisted his friend. "Although if they suspect what trail you're riding tonight, it would be a cinch for them to drygulch you. But what are you going to do after you reach the Cochetopa country? Here you got us to back you up. There you'll be alone. And with the reputation you got, every killing in the country will be plastered on to you. You can't buck a thing like that alone, boy."

Brady put his hand on Donlan's shoulder.

"Can't you understand, Jim?" he asked. "It's just that reputation I want to get away from. I'll never lose it staying here in Cerro."

The Judge rejoined them at the bar, carrying his bottle. It was still full.

"I met Ma Hanks this morning," he said. "She had just returned from the Cochetopa valley. She had something interesting to say about it."

"What was it?" asked Ed, interested.

"She said that the White Rider was on the move again."

"The White Rider?"

"Sure. It's some kind of ghost. It only rides at midnight. Supposed to be the spirit of some old witch that got murdered, and every time it rides it means trouble for the valley—a sure sign of bad trouble."

"Bunk!" retorted Ed Brady. "Ma Hanks is a swell gal and she bakes the finest pies in Cerro, but she's still nothing but a superstitious old lady when it comes to listening to and passing on ghost stories. No, boys, I've made up my mind, and neither drygulchers, nor a cold reception, nor imaginary White Riders will stop me. I'm leaving for the Cochetopa and"—he pulled out his watch—"if I expect to reach there by morning like I figger to, I'd better be leaving right now."

They knew Brady well enough to realize that once he was fully determined on a course, there was little hope of changing him, so they made the best of the matter.

They had a final round of drinks on the house, then helped him saddle his horse and filled the friendly starfilled night with their good-bye shouts as he cantered down the trail.

"There," said Jim Donlan, as the sound of Brady's hoof beats retreated into the distant darkness, "goes one of the finest men on earth. I only hope he ain't making a mistake by leaving, because if he is I'll blame myself for not stopping him."

"Amen," said the Judge. Then as an afterthought, "Swell chance we'd have of stopping him, even if we wanted to."

* * * *

TWO miles outside of Cerro, the three masked men pulled in their sweating horses and listened keenly to see if pursuit had started.

"No one coming," said one.

"They know they couldn't follow our trail at night," said another, "so they're savin' their time."

The third man pulled his neckerchief down from his face, exposing a cruel mouth with jagged teeth. His jaw seemed to slope sideways at an impossible angle. He was obviously the leader of the group.

"I ain't worried about them," he said. "I'm worried about what Kelton will say when he finds we fumbled the job."

"He don't ever have to find out," put in the first gunny. "Why can't we ride back to Cerro soon as it gets light and finish it off?".

"Be too dangerous," protested the second man.

"No the kid is right," said the leader. "It won't be dangerous because nobody saw our faces, so nobody'll know us. And Kelton didn't say we gotta kill him tonight. He just said he don't want that lobo to ever reach the Cochetopa hills. So tomorrer will do just as good. We can ride a bit off the trail now and get some sleep."

A little more discussion and that plan was decided upon. As they were hobbling the horses, the jagged-toothed leader said, "One thing I want you guys to remember—I get first whack at that gunslick from Cerro; no man can crack my jaw and get away with it."

"Aw right," grinned the gunny called the Kid. "But he didn't do much harm to your looks, 'cause you were just about as ugly as any one man could be already." Then as he saw the target of his amusement flush an angry red, he added, "Don't get sore. I was just foolin'. Let's get some shuteye."

The three rolled themselves in their blankets and were soon asleep.

Less than half an hour later Ed Brady, the very man they were gunning for, rode down the trail they had just left, on the way to his new home.

CHAPTER II

THROUGH the night Ed Brady rode, partly through dry, sandy, mesquite-studded badlands, but mainly through green valley country. A bright moon rode with him and sent the shadows of fleecy clouds scurrying over the valley floor.

The odor of sweet grass filled his lungs, and he reveled in the beauty of his surroundings.

He kept his horse at a steady pace until almost dawn, when they came to a small stream flowing from the Cochetopa hills, which stood out darkly but softly in the distance.

Ed watered his horse and drank from the cold, refreshing stream himself. Then he looked toward the hills with pleasure in his eyes and heart.

Shortly after complete sunup, a large ranch house appeared nestling at the foot of a distant hill.

"I'll hit for there," thought Brady, "and get directions to my own layout." It was a large, prosperous looking house, and on pulling up Ed called a loud hello but received no answer.

The front door stood ajar. He knocked loudly, averse to pass a strange threshold without an invitation, but still received no reply.

"Seems funny," he thought. "People don't just go off and leave the door wide open, not even in peaceful country like this. Maybe the folks hereabouts are honest, but you never can tell who might come ariding down the trail. Besides, an open door like this is too inviting to field mice and other such unenjoyable visitors. Something mighty queer here."

He knocked loudly again, and once more called out at the top of his voice, but silence was the only reward of his efforts.

He pondered on whether or not to ride on, but finally decided to look into the house. Pushing the door completely open, he entered.

The doorway opened into a large, comfortably furnished room. A quick glance showed him that it was empty, but in a disorderly condition. Chairs were toppled over, and a large potted plant lay in pieces on the floor.

"Phew," Ed whistled. "Been some rough and tumble fighting going on here, and from the look of the moist earth in that busted plant pot, it didn't happen more than twelve hours ago."

He pushed his way through a door to the right which led him into a kitchen. Beyond this was a well stocked pantry. Both were empty.

Back through the large front room and to the rear of the house he went. No one in the rear room. Between the front and rear rooms and sweeping in a broad, graceful curve toward the front of the house was a staircase leading to the second floor.

ED felt uncomfortable. He wanted to investigate those upper

rooms, but, he thought, "People got a right to leave their house for a while without me poking my nose into their bedrooms."

Just the same, the feeling persisted that this was not merely a case of the owner having gone out for a few minutes. "Nearest place he could have gone is more'n twenty miles away. No, there's something funny here—awful funny—and I ought to find out what it is."

At that moment he saw something which removed all doubt and indecision from his mind. It was a smudge that stood out on the white scrubbed steps.

Ed leaned over and examined it, then touched it. It was dark brown, almost black, and gave beneath his finger as a congealing liquid might.

"That's blood or I'm a tenderfoot," thought Ed, and with no further hesitation dashed up the steps. There was no question of where to go, once the top was reached. There were three doors opening off a hall, but one of these doors had been torn from its hinges and hung broken and sagging.

The sight inside the room was not a pretty one. On the floor, with half his head shot away and his life's blood in a pool around him, was a tall, completely dressed man. On the bed, clothed in nightdress and kimono, lay the body of a woman with graying hair. Her appearance had not been harmed by bullets, except for a look of terror in her still open eyes, but she was just as dead as the man, as a wide circle of blood over her heart testified.

Ed Brady looked about him, and fury filled his mind.

"I came to Cochetopa for peace," he said, "but there can't be any peace in a country where they murder women. Even the wolves in Cerro never shot females."

Then he forced himself to be calm and try to figure out what had happened.

He examined the broken door and found bullet holes through it. On some the wood was splintered inward, on others outward. He picked up the gun which lay near the hand of the murdered man and found its magazine empty.

"Seems like they came in some time last night," he thought, "just afore the old man was ready for bed. His wife, if that is his wife, was upstairs already, but hadn't got in bed yet, for the sheets ain't even pulled down.

"They must have put at least one bullet in him downstairs, but he fought them off and dashed up here. That accounts for the condition of the room downstairs and the blood on the steps.

"Then he barricaded himself in here with his wife, and when they tried to break in he shot through the door. But he only had six bullets in his gun, an no more where he could reach them, so when they were all gone, the ones outside broke the door down and came in.

"They finished him off right in front of his wife—must be a dozen holes in his pore carcass—and then, because she recognized them, or they feared that she might have, they put a bullet through her heart.

"From the moistness of the earth in the busted bowl and the dryness of the blood and the stiffness of the bodies, I'd calc'late they been dead anywhere between ten and twelve hours, making the time of the killing between eight and ten o'clock last night.

"Yeah," he said, "that's about what happened. And I guess it's up to me to find the sheriff or whoever might be in charge around these parts and let him know about it. But first I'm agonna look around some and see if I can pick up any signs of the skulking murderers."

But close examination of the house showed him little and told him no more of the gruesome story than he already knew or had guessed.

OUTSIDE the house, however, was a different matter. There was nothing in the immediate vicinity except the open door to indicate anything untoward, but as he enlarged the circle of examination, he found a clump of trees and bushes about two hundred feet behind the house which caught his experienced eye. Several of the twigs were broken from the

saplings, as though someone had tied some horses there and then later had hurriedly torn them away.

He got down on his knees and examined the earth. It was tamped down by both horses' hoofs and human feet. Scattered around were the remains of about a dozen hand-rolled cigarettes.

"Humm," he thought. "They got here early and waited till the old lady went upstairs. Then they closed in on him. Probably gunnies from the neighborhood, from their desire to get to the old man when he was alone. And pretty low ones, too," he added, remembering the silver-haired lady on the bed. "Well," he thought, "I guess that's all I can do around here now. Time to hunt up the sheriff."

He was brushing his knees as he pulled himself upright, when a voice cut sharply through the thoughts which had so deeply engaged him.

The voice was deep and forceful and the words it said were, "Reach for the sky, stranger, and reach mighty fast."

Ed spun around and found himself looking up the muzzle of a long Winchester, held in the hands of a powerfully built man with graying temples. Clustered near him were five or six young fellows, some with their hands on their guns expectantly, the others looking as though they hoped Ed would give them cause to draw theirs.

Brady put his hands high over his head, but he could see that these were not the type of men who had tried to blow him apart the night before in Cerro. These men were unmasked and looked like clean, upright citizens.

"The reception is starting," he thought. "These are some of my new neighbors, and from the looks of things they don't cotton to me none."

"Take his gun," said the man with the Winchester, in a voice of authority, and one of the younger men closed in and lifted Ed's Colt from his holster.

"All right. You can drop your hands now, and tell us just who you are and what you're doing in these parts."

"Well, mister," said Ed Brady, "first I want to say I don't like your tone, or your actions, and I don't care if you are six to one and have the drop on me. I'll take you singly or all at once and teach you better manners, but that'll have to wait a while, because I got some important business to attend to right now. And if it answers one of your questions, all right. What I'm doing in these parts right now is looking for the sheriff."

"You was looking into that clump of bushes when we came on you," said the old man. "Expecting to find the sheriff in there?" he added sarcastically.

"Naw." Ed Brady had decided it would serve no useful purpose to allow himself to be provoked to anger. "I was just looking to see if I could find the trail of the varmints that killed the old man and lady back in the ranch house."

His words drew a prompt reaction from the men.

"Ed—Steve," their leader called. "You two stay here and keep this lobo covered while I take a look-see inside."

The two designated stayed; the others dashed rapidly for the house.

IN about ten minutes they returned, and there was a set squareness about their jaws which Ed Brady well understood. They felt exactly as he had when he had seen that terrified stare in the dead eyes of the gray-haired lady.

"Little Pancho was right," the old man explained to the two men who had remained. "There was shooting out here just like he said—plenty of it. Tom Morgan and his wife are both dead, and it looks like the killer didn't even have sense enough to light a shuck out of here." He turned to Ed. "C'mon, you," and his voice was harsh and full of hatred now. "Get on your horse and come with us."

"Now, hold on, boys," he said. "I didn't have nothing to do with that. I was just going after the sheriff to report it to him."

"Yeah? Well, you can make your report right now, young feller." And the old man turned his vest out to show a large, well shined star which read: Sheriff—Cochetopa County. "I'm Walt Toler, sheriff in these

parts, and unless you can give one helluva good excuse for being here, I'm arresting you for the murder of Tom and Mary Morgan. Start talking, buckaroo. Who are you and where you heading for?"

Ed thought rapidly. If he exposed his identity, it would only add to their belief that he was the killer. He decided to attempt to keep that to himself, for the time being, at least.

"Who I am and where I'm going ain't the important thing. What's important is that this killing was done early last night and I got here less than an hour ago. You can check that easy enough if you back track over my trail."

"How do you know when the shootin' came off if you wasn't here?" cut in the sheriff sharply, confident that he had trapped his man.

"Because the blood was almost all congealed already, and the earth in the busted plant was just beginning to dry up," explained Ed. "If it had been busted longer than twelve hours, it would have been much dryer, and if it had been much less than that, the blood wouldn't have been so stiff."

"He's right about that," agreed one of the posse.

"Sure he's right about that," said the sheriff, "but he ain't telling us nothing we didn't know already. Little Pancho said it was about nine o'clock when he heard the shots. That don't prove that this lobo didn't do it. How do we know he ain't been here since last night?"

"Because I wasn't within fifty miles of here last night."

"Oh, no? Well, where were you?"

Ed Brady shut his jaw tight. To tell where he had been would be to expose his identity, and that would be harmful rather than helpful.

"Well," prodded the sheriff, "where were you at nine o'clock last night?"

"That ain't important," insisted Brady. "What's important is that the murderers, and I figure there was at least three of them from the mauling their horses gave the earth here, are making thir getaway while you're wasting your time with me. Here, look"—he pointed to the marks and cigarette butts he had discovered—"here's where they tied their horses and waited."

The sheriff's voice was cold as he answered, "I'll be the one to decide what's important, stranger. And I'll decide if I'm wasting my time. And so long as you won't tell us where you were last night, I'm taking you in with us. Come on; get on your horse."

Just then one of the posse cried excitedly, "I *knew* I saw that gunny before, and I've been teasing my brain for the answer. And I got it. That's Ed Brady, from up Cerro way, and one of the toughest gunpokes in the Southwest territory!"

Sheriff Toler looked up sharply.

"Is that true? Are you Ed Brady?"

"It's true about me being Brady, but it's a lie about me being a tough gunpoke."

The sheriff nodded grimly. "We've heard of you, Brady, and what we've heard hasn't had any good in it. I was a mite doubtful before, but now I reckon we got the right man."

Several of the posse pulled the sheriff aside and spoke to him in a low voice. He shook his head.

"No, boys," he said. "I can't say I'm out of sympathy with your idea, but I can't tolerate no lynching. This is a matter for the law to tend to, and that's how it's agoin' to be done."

"Yeah, Walt," said one of his men. "You're right about that most times. But this is a different kind of case. He killed *Mrs* Morgan, too, and in cold blood. There's only one way to handle a thing like that." And he touched his rope meaningfully.

Brady's tongue was cleaving to the top of his mouth—not from fear, but from the horror of the thought that these men all believed him guilty.

He raked his captors with a rapid glance, and what he saw was not encouraging. Their eyes were cold, and their chins were set in a way that promised that they would not submit easily to the sheriff's insistence upon a legal trial.

Ed knew well what to expect from such men, once their anger was raised to a fever pitch. They would act first, and consider the matter afterward.

The killing of a man in fair fight

might arouse some antagonism, even create a feud, but such an event would wend its legal way, with the accused killer going free on bail pending his trial. A holdup or stage robbery would land its perpetrator in jail for a while, without creating undue excitement. But there were three crimes which called for a rapid and extreme penalty. They were horse stealing, cattle rustling, and the harming of a good woman.

Having lived all his life among these traditions, Ed Brady knew exactly what was going on in the minds of the other men, for he felt the same way about the murderers himself. But understanding their feelings didn't make him feel any better about the possibility of dangling from the end of a rope. Yet he knew it would be practically impossible to convince these men of his innocence while they were in their present frame of mind.

It would also be foolish of him to expect ever to arrive in Cochetopa alive if he went with them, for they would not hesitate to gang up on the sheriff if he continued to oppose them, and hold him a helpless prisoner until after they had finished doing what they considered to be their duty. Once the lynching was accomplished, the sheriff would be released. He might or might not bring charges against his subordinates, depending on how strongly he felt about the matter. But his actions would bring very little solace to Ed Brady, who would be swinging from some cottonwood limb, very completely unaware whether his lynchers were punished or not.

"No," thought Ed. "There's only one way for me. I've got to get away from here, fast."

He looked around for some possible means of escape, but saw that his captors were closing in on him, and that they were between him and his horse.

He threw his shoulders back and waited. Had the boys convinced Sheriff Toler? Or had he been able to overrule them for the time being?

The sheriff's first words eased his mind for a moment. "Get on your horse, Brady," he said. "We're taking you into town."

They walked him to his horse in silence, and one held his bridle.

The sheriff ordered, "Get yore rope, Slim, and tie his hands behind him. We don't want no breaks on the way in."

Slim went for his rope, while the others remained standing around Brady.

"This," thought Ed, "is about the toughest pickle I was ever in, in my whole life, and it looks like pretty soon it's going to be tougher, unless I can do something about it pronto."

CHAPTER III

ED BRADY'S mind worked rapidly. If he waited until his hands were tied, escape would become just so much more difficult. If he waited until his captors got onto their own horses, which were tied at the front of the house, pursuit would be made easier. He realized there was not a second to spare.

The time to act with even the slightest hope of success was that very moment, when he had free use of hands and feet and the others were unmounted and would be taken by surprise. Of course, there would be bullets to dodge, but he would have to take his chance on that.

Luck was with him in that the sheriff had left his rifle inside, which meant that if Ed could get the jump on them he could be out of pistol range in a few minutes.

His feet hung forward, and with a sudden movement his spurs raked back into the tender flanks of his mount. At the same moment, he made a grab and pulled the reins from the hands of the man who had been holding them loosely and unsuspectingly.

The horse reared up, helping to pull the reins free, then was off with a spring, as though he had been shot from a cannon.

Straight for the clump of trees Ed headed, to put them between him and the posse's bullets when they should recover from surprise enough to draw their guns.

What he had hoped for happened.

The men did not rush for their horses immediately. Instead, they emptied their guns after him. Only one bullet found its way through the bushes toward him, and that merely tore its way through the generous sleeve of his flaming red shirt.

By then, Brady had cleared the small thicket and was out on open ground. By the time the posse had reloaded their weapons he was out of range and heading for the hills.

They threw a few more futile shots after him, then made a concerted rush for their horses, for his attempt at escape convinced them all the more firmly of his guilt.

Ed had known his would be their reaction. He knew, too, that if he were caught, the sheriff could no more hold them in check than he could stop a forest fire single-handed.

Ed Brady was riding for his life, and he knew it!

The element of surprise had worked in his favor, but there was one factor which would be against him. His horse had been traveling all night at a good pace and was not nearly as fresh as the horses of his pursuers.

Given a long chase over level ground, and they would surely overtake him in time. A hasty look over his shoulder confirmed this suspicion. It was for this reason that he had shot off the main trail and aimed for the wooded hills. The hills were closer now, but it was questionable if he could reach their protection before the posse got withing accurate gun range.

HE URGED his horse to a burst of speed, but he could sense that this spurt would not be a long one. Overtired at the start of the race, it was impossible to hope for the horse to keep up the killing pace for any length of time. Bullets were falling near him as the posse came closer, and the danger was increasing with every moment.

He took one more calculating glance at the riders behind him, then at the trees ahead, and cried out, "We're going to make it, old paint—we're going to make it!"

A few more beats of those flying hoofs and they were within the dark, cool, protecting shadows of the big trees.

Swiftly he wheeled to his left, went in a few hundred feet, turned, and shot off at another angle, keeping the paint facing uphill all the while. He heard his pursuers shouting as they entered the shadows and continued on, fearing they might hear him, though he knew how difficult it was to trace sound in this place where the vastness of the hillside and the presence of the trees sent out deceptive echoes and reverberations.

They could follow the trail he left, but they could not follow it as quickly as he had made it. They would have to dismount and circle half a dozen times, and all the while he would be gaining on them.

Fifteen minutes of riding brought him to a stream. "This finishes it," he told the horse happily. "Well go along the stream bed, and if they ever pick up our trial again, it won't be my fault."

No matter how careful a rider may be, he cannot avoid leaving his mark on the trail he takes, whether it be the hoof prints of his horse, a stone dislodged, a flurry of dead leaves, newly disturbed and upturned, or a twig snapped by his passing. But no one can follow hoof prints in a stony stream bed; the only chance in such a case is to follow the stream, both up and down, on both its sides, to see where the horseman left it to take to solid ground again.

And if the leavetaking is done where hard rock touches the shore, the trail is almost impossible to find.

For several hours Ed picked his way carefully, until he felt sure that he was safe from pursuit; then, the excitement of the chase having worn down, he felt a deep gnawing in his stomach, and realized that he had not eaten since he had left Cerro.

"It was only last night," he reflected, "but it seems like a year, and my stomach feels that way too."

They had remained in the stream until it had faded into nothingness and had continued far uphill beyond that point. The trees were less dense

now, but seemed larger and taller, and the ground had become level.

"Top of one of the hills," thought Ed. "This would be a good place to take a look to see where I'm at."

HE SELECTED a tree with fairly low branches and, standing on his saddle, jumped and made contact with the lowest branch.

Pulling himself upward was no easy job, for his spurs kept getting entangled in the heavy foliage, but finally he reached a point high enough to survey the surrounding country.

Far below to the east, and stretching as far as he could see, was the lush valley through which he had come the night before. He looked expectantly, hoping to see the sheriff and his men riding across the valley and back to town, but no amount of sharp looking could bring them into view, for they were still beating the hillside forest looking for a clue to his whereabouts. The men of Cochetopa didn't give up easily.

Both north and south of his location new hills rose precipitously, seemingly out of the top of the one he had ascended. But to the west his view was clear. He saw a broad plateau, and about three or four miles off, more hills. The hill he was on seemed the crotch between the two surrounding hills and the only opening onto that level plateau.

It was a beautiful and colorful view, but at the moment Ed Brady was interested in neither color nor beauty. For, set cozily near one end of the level grazing ground, was a house, and from its chimney puffs of smoke were rising. Smoke meant a fire, fire meant food, and food was the thing that was uppermost in his mind at the moment.

He carefully took his bearings, then hastily descended from his observation post and proceeded with his journey.

In about half an hour he had hit the treeless clearing and the house was in plain view. His native caution prevented him from making a dash for it. Instead, he stayed within the shadow of the trees, skirting the clearing until he was at the point nearest the house, and all the while keeping his eye on it to see if anything suspicious occurred.

Some cattle were grazing nearby, and he cautiously approached them to find the brand of the ranch he was making for.

His mouth dropped with surprise when there, boldly branded on the flanks of the animals, was a star with a tail.

"The Shooting Star!" he said. "My own spread!"

New doubts assailed him. He had not expected to find anyone at his ranch. The smoke showed that someone *was* there.

He pondered for a few moments on the course he should take, and decided finally that he would take a chance on the ranch house. But he did not ride directly to it. Instead he tied his horse to one of the trees and proceeded toward the house afoot. As soon as he hit the clearing, he descended on all fours, and proceeded along at a snail's pace.

No use making his presence known too soon and inviting trouble, if the people in the house should prove hostile to him.

Time seemed endless as he crawled along, but after what seemed like endless hours of crawling through the rich, tall grass, he found himself near the rear of the house. No movement had come from it; to all intents and purposes it seemed deserted, except for the wisps of smoke which continued to float from its chimney.

Slowly he rose and quietly made his way to a window. He peeked in, careful to remove his hat first, and to conceal as much of his body as he could.

The room was empty!

HE MOVED cautiously around the rear, past the back entrance to a window at the other side of the house, and repeated the performance.

This, he saw, was the kitchen, and the odor of bacon came strongly to his nostrils through the open window. Sitting on a chair with his back to the window was a man whose form was vaguely familiar. He was look-

ing at something which he had apparently placed on the table, just out of arm's reach. The object he was looking at so fondly was a square, long-necked bottle of Mount Vernon whiskey, and that squat, round form, Ed was sure, could belong to no other than the Judge.

A wave of gratefulness swept over Ed Brady. He had expected to find enemies waiting, and instead had foung his loyal friend.

"Judge!" he shouted through the open window, and the little round man almost rolled off his chair with surprise.

In a moment Ed was inside and gladly pounding the Judge on the shoulder.

"Why you so late?" asked the Judge sternly. "I been waiting here for you since soon after dawn, and it's nigh on to noon now."

He seemed to have deliberately forgotten that Ed had forbidden him to come here, and Ed was so happy to see him that he did not make an issue of it. Instead, he said, "Food! Is there any food in the house, Judge? I feel as hollow as a rifle barrel. I gotta eat before I can talk."

"I got some coffee heating, and I'll have you a mess of bacon and eggs to start on before you can get yourself washed up and freshened," replied the Judge, and began to skim around the kitchen like a bug on a hot stove.

He had not exaggerated, for by the time Ed had washed the dirt and dust of his journey off his hands and face, a great platter of bacon and eggs and a steaming cup of coffee were waiting for him.

The Judge had meanwhile opened some tins and was heating more food. "Looks like you been on a diet, the way you're eating," he commented.

"Yeah, a forced one," Ed agreed.

"Something wrong?" asked the Judge anxiously. "I didn't hear any horse when you came up, and I notice that your gun's missing." He nodded toward Ed's empty holster.

"Wrong is a poor word for it," said Ed. "It's bad—plumb bad. But before I tell you about it, tell me how you got here—and why."

The Judge sat down. "Look, Ed," he said. "You gotta promise me one thing. You gotta promise me you won't drive me away. I couldn't talk to you at the bar last night—the boys would have laughed at me—but, Ed, I made a resolution. I swore that if I could come out here with you, I'd lay off the liquor. I don't want to be a low-down guzzlin' bum no more, Ed. I want to be a man again. I couldn't never do it in Cerro, but here I can—I know I can." There were almost tears in the old man's eyes as he went on. "You've been good to me, Ed. You're the only one didn't push me around and make jokes about me.

"You could help me, son. I'd be stronger if I was near you. And I can help you, too. You'll need someone around here to do the cooking and help you on the range. Please, Ed, you'll let me stay on, won't you?"

"Gosh, Judge, I didn't know it meant so much to you," Ed replied. "But I don't hold out much hope for your reform. When I first looked in the window, you had that bottle right in front of you and was looking at it like it was your Sunday gal."

THE Judge hopped up, dashed across the room, brought the bottle back and set it in front of Ed.

"Yeah," he replied. "I was looking at it, all right. But now you look at it. What do you see? Not a drop gone—not a single drop! Now what do you think of that?"

Ed whistled, and looked at the Judge with new respect. "You got more will power than I gave you credit for."

"Then I can stay?"

"Wel-l"—Ed hesitated—"I guess I wouldn't have to worry about you none if your will power held out, but there's other reasons now why it wouldn't be none too safe for you—or for me either, for that matter."

"I knew it—I knew it," moaned the Judge miserably. "Every time I get a chance to straighten out, something has to happen. It's enough to drive a man to drink. What's the matter this time?"

"First tell me," asked Ed, "how did you get here? Did you have to ride

through a gap in the hills back yonder?" He pointed to the way he had come himself.

"No." The Judge shook his head. "I came in through the west over a clear trail. It was easy to find. I asked an old Indian I met down in the valley below which was the Shooting Star, and he gave me the directions. Wasn't no trouble finding it at all. You must have stayed in the valley instead of taking the left fork, to have landed up behind those hills."

"I sure wish I had met that Indian and got off that trail before I ever hit that valley. Then I wouldn't have the sheriff and his posse on my tail right now."

"The sheriff?" The Judge jumped to attention. "What'd you do to run a foul of the law this time?"

"Nothing, Judge, nothing at all. I just happened to stumble on a double murder a few minutes before the sheriff rode up, so they thought I had done it."

"Being there don't make you guilty," protested the Judge.

"No, that's what I told them," said Ed. "But those men were mad. You'd be, too, if you saw the nice old lady who was shot. And when they discovered I was Ed Brady from Cerro, that cinched it for them. They're looking for me with a rope, Judge."

"That reputation of yours," moaned the Judge. "That's just what I was afraid of. They'll pin everything on you, if they can. But tell me the whole story."

ED TOLD him briefly of the events since their parting, of his capture and escape. When he had finished, the Judge sat in silence for a moment, then asked, "Well, what do you plan to do now?"

"That's what I've been trying to figure out," said Ed. "I can't just go on living here as though nothing had happened, because sooner or later they're going to find out Ed Brady, the man the're looking for, is living at the Shooting Star, and the whole town will ride out to get me."

"You're right about that," agreed the Judge.

"And I can't just run off, because I'll have a murder rap hanging over me wherever I go. I don't mind being accused of killing those thieving jaspers back in Cerro, because there it was them or me, and I was shooting in self-defense. And if the lawman there happened to side in with them, he only got what was coming to him. But I ain't go no intention of hiding out and being chased from pillar to post all over the Southwest on the belief that I would kill a helpless old lady. No, Judge, I can't run away from that."

"Well, if you can't stay, and you can't go, I don't see what there is for you to do," said the Judge, puzzled.

"Seems only one thing left," answered Ed slowly, weighing the words as he spoke. "I got to give myself up and convince them that I'm not guilty."

"What!" the Judge exploded. "Give yourself up? Ed Brady, you're plumb crazy. They'd hang you up before you could convince them of anything."

Ed shook his head stubbornly.

"Just the same," he insisted, "that's the only thing left for me to do. It'll be up to me to convince them. I can prove I was in Cerro when the murders were committed, if they'll only give me time to prove it."

"I still say you're as crazy as a steer that's et loco weed. But the first thing you ought to do is turn in and get some sleep. You ain't slept since day before yesterday, and there'll be time to go riding in to the sheriff after you wake up."

Ed looked at him thoughtfully. "Guess you're right about that," he agreed. "I need some rest bad. If you'll bring in my horse—he's tied over in the trees there—I'll hit the hay for a few hours."

The Judge agreed. He went for the horse, unsaddled him, and set him loose in the corral. When he returned to the house, Brady was already sleeping heavily. The Judge took his precious bottle and, standing on a chair, pushed it far back on a high shelf, saying, "Get thee behind me, Satan. There's man's work to do, and no time for temptation!"

CHAPTER IV

BRADY'S exhaustion was much greater than he had thought, for he slept completely around the clock and did not waken until the morning of the next day.

The Judge had a hearty breakfast waiting.

While they ate, Ed said, "Yesterday seems like a nightmare. Did it really happen, or was it just a bad dream?"

"If it was a dream, you had it before you went to sleep," answered the old man soberly. "But now that you're rested, maybe you'll see how foolish you'd be to go riding into town."

"No." Ed shook his head. "I don't see that. It's the only course that's open."

"Blast it," said the Judge. "I was afraid you would take that stand. I tell you it's foolhardy, dangerous and rash, and the same thing as putting your neck in a noose. You could hide out for just a little while till the excitement blows over, and then try to clear yourself. They won't be so liable to rush you to the nearest tree a month from now."

"Hiding would be taken as a sign of guilt," protested Ed. "I'm going in now."

"Well," said the Judge, "I knew it was a waste of time to talk to you, but I had to try to save your skin. And here"—he handed Ed his own gun—"better have this just in case you have to make them stand still while you're explaining to them."

Ed grinned and took the gun.

"Cheer up, old-timer," he smiled. "You're as fussy as a lady whose daughter is going out sparking with a beau for the first time. Don't worry; I'll be able to take care of myself." But he experienced renewed strength, just the same, as he fitted the Judge's gun snugly into his own empty holster.

He left the Judge talking and mumbling to himself, and quit the Shooting Star by the western trail.

The path was narrow, but well defined. It picked its way between the hilltops, and opened onto the broad valley.

Ed Brady rode carefully, for he had no desire to be captured before he reached the sheriff. He counted on obtaining a fair hearing by virtue of the fact that he was giving himself up. To enter the sheriff's office with a gun poked into his back would negate his journey and put him in the same position he had been in at the Morgan ranch. And he certainly had been in at the Morgan ranch. And he certainly had no desire to come to the point where he would have to shoot it out with someone trying to capture him, for that would only add another charge to the one he was trying to wipe out.

That is why, when he heard the pounding of a horse's hoofs behind him, he pulled hastily off the path and into the trees.

But a rapid glance told him he had nothing to fear from this encounter, for what was approaching him at a mad pace was not a horseman, but a horse and buckboard, and it was driven by a girl.

"She shore is hell bent for leather," thought Ed. "'Tain't safe on a trail like this. If one of them wheels hits one of them big boulders, the buckboard is agonna turn end up and smash itself and her to little pieces."

The buckboard was abreast of his position now, and his quick glance noted two things. First, that the girl seemed remarkably beautiful; second, that she was not urging the horse to its dangerous pace, but was instead doing everything in her power to pull it in. Apparently the animal had been severely frightened by something and was completely out of control.

Ed didn't even stop to think. He pulled his paint around and gave chase to the buckboard.

OVERTAKING it was a simple matter, for his horse was not encumbered by a heavy wagon as was the other. But he knew he could do no good behind the frightened animal; it was necessary for him to pull ahead or at least alongside it in order to head it off.

Therein lay the difficulty, for the trail at that point was barely wide enough to give free passage for the buckboard.

A hundred feet ahead he saw that the trail widened by a few feet. He had just time enough to call out, "Hold him in tight, miss," before the wider portion was reached.

He pulled the paint around to the side, and by the merest flick of his spurs made his desire known. The paint responded as though it had read his thoughts. It widened its stride and spurted with all its strength to pass the buckboard before the trail should narrow down again, for to be caught alongside that cumbersome, heavy vehicle would surely result in a serious spill for its rider and possibly great damage to the paint.

The spurt was successful, and he gained the horse's head. Down the trail a way, he could see a narrowing in the path which would surely mean disaster. There was no time for him to get in front of the madly fleeing horse; he must bring it to a halt before that narrow portion was reached.

He pulled his left foot across the saddle and stood precariously balanced on his right stirrup; then, after one quick glance to calculate the distance, he leaped.

As his body hurtled through the air, he realized that the runaway horse had seen the leap and had become more frightened and veered to the right, pulling almost out of Ed's reach—almost but not completely.

He had figured to land on the runaway's back; while still in mid-air he realized that this would not be possible. But he was able to reach the reins with one clawing hand, and as he went down to earth he got a good hold on them.

The reins pulled him along as he heaved and tugged at them. If he could pull the horse's head back far enough, he knew it would stop its wild race with fear. He also knew that if he let the reins go, he would be crushed by those heavy wheels which were rumbling along just a few feet behind him.

The horse was struggling to go on, but Ed's sheer weight, plus his manipulation of the reins, was too much for the wild-eyed animal. Prancing and shivering, it came to a dead stop, barely fifty feet from the dangerous section of the trail.

THE girl had jumped down immediately and was helping Ed to his feet. He was dust laden and dirty from dragging on the ground, and there was a large rent in his flaming red shirt.

As he brushed himself off, the girl said, in a small, frightened voice:

"You—you m i g h t have been killed!"

Ed laughed. "That would have been a good joke on some of the boys in Cochetopa. They're figgering on quite a different kind of passing away ceremony."

"I don't know what you mean, but I do know you risked your life to save me, and I'm very grateful to you."

"It wasn't anything." "We better try to calm down your horse; he's still trembling with fear."

He went to the horse's head and began patting and soothing him, meanwhile speaking friendly words in a soft voice. From his levis' pocket he took a few lumps of sugar which he habitually carried and coaxed the horse to munch them.

In a short while the tired, wild-eyed beast had gotten over his fright and was docilely awaiting further orders.

"He'll be all right now," said Ed. "What happened to him?"

"He's newly broke," the girl replied. "This is the first time he's been hitched to the wagon, so he was a little nervous. Then back on that bit of prairie section we passed through, he seemed to step into what looked like a gopher hole and pulled up on his haunches. And the gopher picked just that time to jump out of his hole and scurry between Jupiter's feet. I guess the gopher was just as frightened as the horse, but that didn't help any. Jupiter's one idea was to get away from there fast, and nothing I could do would stop him. If you hadn't happened along—"

Ed's discomfort increased as she

started on that subject again, and in embarrassment he cut into her words. "Well, miss, I guess I better be getting on. I got a kind of date in Cochetopa."

"That's where I'm going, too," she said. "would you like to ride with me?"

"Shore would," he answered with alacrity. "Just wait a shake while I gather in my paint. He stepped off the trail onto the hill after I jumped."

He walked a few steps up the hillside, whistling a few bars with which the paint was familiar.

There was a clatter of hoofbeats as the horse answered his call, and in a moment it waas waiting for him, showing hardly any signs of its hard run.

"This narrow trail runs right into the wide valley a little ahead," the girl told him. "We'll be able to ride side by side there, but I guess you'll have to ride ahead through this part."

Ed nodded his agreement and preceded the buckboard until they reached the broad valley. Then he waited and continued alongside the smiling girl, who seemed to have completely recovered from her experience.

"I've never seen you in these parts. You new here?"

"Yep," said Ed. "Just got in yesterday."

"Oh," she replied. Then, hopefully, it seemed, "Aiming to stay?"

"Depends on the reception I get in Cochetopa. You live hereabouts?"

"Just down the trail, about four miles from where we met. I'm from the Diamond O."

SHE looked at him as though she expected this information to affect him in some manner; when it did not, she went on. "My name is Susan Wells." Then she looked at him expectantly again.

"Thank you, ma'am. My name is Ed Brady and I'm the new owner of the Shooting Star. Looks like we're gonna be neighbors."

"I'm glad of that," she answered with a friendly smile, "but doesn't—doesn't my name mean anything to you?"

"Why, no, ma'am, exceptin' that it sounds awful pretty." Ed felt himself blushing as he said it. "Live with your folks at the Diamond O?"

The smile left her face, and she shook her curly head slowly.

"No," she answered. "I have no folks. My dad died a while back, and I'm running the ranch."

"I'm sorry," said Ed. "I shore seem to be saying the wrong things. You better talk for a while."

"That's all right," she assured him. Then, after a slight pause, "I'm glad we met before you heard about me. It gives us a chance to be friendly for a little while, anyway."

"Why, ma'am—" he began.

"Everybody calls me Susan," she interrupted.

"All right, Susan. But I can't imagine anything anyone could say that would make me feel less friendly. You talk like you was a notorious owl-hooter or something."

She made no reply.

"Would it be asking too much for you to tell me what lies I'm going to hear about you?"

She gave him a dazzling smile. "Thanks, Ed, for putting it that way. But you'll hear soon enough. Then you can make up your mind if the stories are lies."

"It strikes me, ma'am—uh, Susan, I mean—that we two are in something of the same boat. There's some mighty big whoppers making the rounds about me, too That's what I'm riding to Cochetopa for. I'm aiming to put a stop to them. And if I do, then I'll be back at the Shooting Star and be one of your best neighbors."

"And if you don't?" There was a hint of anxiety in her tone.

He shrugged. "Then I don't imagine I'll go anywhere much."

Her forehead wrinkled in thought for a moment; then she broke out, "I remember! Ed Brady is the Cerro gunny who killed the Morgans! Well, I don't believe it. No one who saw you could believe you would kill a helpless old lady."

"I hope the sheriff'll feel that way," said Brady. "He didn't yesterday. He was sure I was the killer."

"But half the town is out in posses

looking for you," she said in alarm. "They're combing the hills with a fine-tooth comb. And they've got orders to shoot to kill."

He sighed. "That's what I was afraid of."

"Well, don't you worry." She had changed from a frightened girl to a protective woman. "You just ride in alongside of me and no one will even give you a second glance. I'll drive right by the sheriff's office, and I bet we get there without being stopped once."

"It's awful nice of you to say that, ma'am, but I don't see no call for you to take my troubles on your shoulders. From what you say, you got plenty of troubles of your own, without adding to them."

"But it's no trouble to me," she insisted. "Not that I wouldn't want to do it even if it were, but it just happens that it's not. All we do is keep riding together, just the way we are. It's only a little way more to town, and chances are we won't meet a soul. But if we do, they'll think you're one of my ranch hands riding into town with me to help pick up supplies. Oh—oh—" The last ejaculation was wrung from her by the sight of a horseman waiting for her down the trail.

"That's Al Ruffer," she hastily confided to Ed Brady. "Just sit quiet if he stops us. He'll be more interested in me than in you."

AS they drew up alongside the horseman, he held out his hand and stopped Susan's horse. Ed noted that he was big and raw-boned, with plenty of power in his muscles. "Good rough and tumble fighter," he thought.

"Hello, Sue," Ruffer called to the girl. "Where you been keepin' yourself?"

Ed had stopped his horse and stood waiting a bit away, as a respectful ranch hand might while his boss was conducting some personal business. But he heard the voice and words plainly and he did not like the tone. "Too possessive," he thought. "Like he owns her, or intends to."

He didn't stop to ask himself why he should resent the fact that this girl, whom he had met for the first time less than half an hour before, might have an attachment for some other man. All he knew was that he did resent it, and strongly. "Not a swaggering bully like Ruffer, anyway," he thought.

"You used to call me when you was coming into town, Sue," Al was saying. "How come you don't do that no more?"

"Maybe it's because I didn't like the way you acted when I did call you, Al," she replied.

"Lovers' quarrel," muttered Ed to himself, and felt hopelessly miserable all of a sudden.

Ruffer's tone changed from one of possessive affability to annoyance.

"There's plenty of gals hereabouts wouldn't feel that way. You can't afford to be so gosh blamed picky, Sue —not the way things are now."

Ed could see her face flaming with anger. Hot words seemed ready to burst from her lips. Then the color drained from her cheeks, leaving her pale and frightened-looking again.

"Please, Al," she said, and her voice was tired and had a beaten sound, "I've got to get into town now."

But Ruffer was loath to let up. "Maybe the reason you ain't called on me lately is because you got a new ranny to ride with you." And he threw a hate-filled glance at Ed Brady.

"That has nothing to do with it, Al," insisted Susan hastily. "This is the first time he's riding with me."

"Well, let it be the last," snapped Ruffer, as though giving orders to a subordinate. "You!" he shouted to Brady. And when Ed turned around to face him, he ordered, "You're not to ride with Miss Wells any more! Understand?"

More than anything else at that moment, Ed wanted to sink his solid fist into the big man's midriff and hear him grunt.

At the same time he remembered his mission. His one important task was to reach the sheriff's office. A fight now might ruin everything. It would draw a crowd from the town,

and, once recognized, his chance for giving himself up peacefully would go by the boards.

He made his answer to Ruffer sound as meek as he could. "Yessir," he said. "I understand."

Ruffer was not the sort of man who knew enough to let a good thing alone. He pulled his horse alongside Brady's and stuck a huge hand under Ed's face. "And if you ever forget it, you'll meet up with this," he said, waving the fist menacingly.

Ed tightened his jaw and held his words in by the sheer physical effort of refusing to let them pass through his tight, set lips. "I'll remember what you said," he grated.

Ruffer, satisfied with his outward subservience, rode back to Susan and addressed her. "I'm sorry you have to leave, but I'll be seeing you out at your ranch real soon." And with a wave of his hat, he dashed off.

SUSAN clucked to her horse and continued toward town. Brady rode alongside her. Both were silent. Finally Ed could contain himself no longer. He burst out with: "That Ruffer—is he—" But he could not say the words.

"Is he what, Ed?"

"Is he—I mean, do you—are you—oh, gosh, I don't know how to say it!"

"Are you trying to ask whether Al Ruffer means anything to me?" she helped him out.

"Yes," he nodded miserably. "I know it's none of my business, but that's what I wanted to find out."

"Well, it really is none of your business, but there's no secret about it."

His heart seemed to drop two feet farther down.

"Everybody else knows, so there's no reason why you shouldn't. Al Ruffer means nothing to me, nothing at all!"

He wanted to shout for joy, but restrained himself.

"But the way he spoke," he said, "it sounded as if—"

"Yes, I know," she replied. "Al has been talking that way for a long time. He's determined to marry me, regardless of how I feel about it. I could handle that part of it, but unfortunately I owe him a sort of debt, so I can't just send him packing."

"I'm at your service, Susan, if there's anything I can do to help you. I know maybe I didn't sound very brave letting Ruffer speak to me like that, but I promise—"

"Ed Brady, you must think women are as foolish as you men. Did you think I couldn't see what you were thinking while he was bullying you? Sitting tight the way you did was probably one of the bravest acts of your life. It took will power; it took courage. To have spoiled your larger plan by fighting with him then would have been foolish and childish, but that's what ninety-nine out of a hundred men would have done, just the same. By refusing to allow yourself to be provoked, you showed yourself to be one man in a hundred, Ed Brady, and I'm proud of you."

"Gosh," he stuttered. "You shore got an observing eye and a clear brain."

"Thanks," she answered, "but I'd like it better if you said I had pretty eyes instead of observing ones."

"Oh," Ed faltered. "Did I say the wrong thing again? I didn't mean your eyes *wasn't* nice. As a matter of fact, they're about the most beautiful eyes I ever did see, but—" His face and neck were red again. "Please, Miss Susan, I feel as if I'm making a fool out of myself, but you'll have to excuse me, because I ain't spent much time in the company of girls like you and I ain't got any experience in how to talk to them."

"Well, for a novice, you're doing all right." And she laughed, showing two rows of pearly, even white teeth. "In less than half an hour you've complimented me on my name, my eyes, my observation and my brain."

"I wasn't meaning to be forward."

"Of course you weren't. And that's why I feel very flattered and liked to hear you say those things. And I like you, too, Ed Brady. I hope you can settle your trouble with the sheriff. And from what I've seen of you, I'm sure you will."

He seemed to be riding on a cloud instead of on his old reliable paint.

"There," she said, pointing, "is the sheriff's office, and it looks as if you're lucky. No one in there but Sheriff Toler himself, so you'll have time to talk to him. Good-bye, neighbor, and good luck." And with a flick of her reins she was off, leaving him to stare after her in a happy daze.

CHAPTER V

SO ENTRANCED had Ed been with the girl, he barely noticed that they had entered the town. Cochetopa was the county seat of Cochetopa County and the largest town in the hills that bore the same name. It looked like countless other towns in the Southwest, with its one main street, its mountainous background and low frame and adobe buildings.

Only the bank was three stories high and made of brick. Two stories was the limit of height for all other structures. Three or four dusty side streets ran off the main street, going nowhere in particular.

Cochetopa had gone through its lawless days when the man with the best draw was the accepted master of the town until a better shot came along.

That period had ended with the coming of Sheriff Toler who, with the upright citizens behind him, had driven out gun rule and put in law and order.

The town seemed exceptionally quiet. "My luck," thought Ed. "They're all out hunting for me—that's why I can walk in here without running into any of them."

He had decided on how to approach the sheriff. He would walk in and present his gun to show that his intentions were peaceful. Toler couldn't refuse to let him have his say then.

He was lifting his gun from his holster, and it had already cleared leather, when Toler looked up and saw him in the doorway. The sheriff's face went taut, and his hands went up over his head. There was a bitter look in his eyes.

"I should have known better than to leave the door open with a cold-blooded killer like you about, Brady. Well, go ahead and shoot; I deserve whatever I get for being so plumb careless."

Ed threw back his head and laughed. "I ain't meaning to shoot no one, Sheriff," he said.

"No? You got yore gun out to use it for a toothpick, I suppose!" He kept his hands up.

"Put your hands down, man," said Ed. "The reason my gun is out is because I was agonna give it to you to show my peaceful intentions."

The sheriff dropped his hands slowly. "You mean you didn't come to kill? Then what do you want?"

"I want a chance to talk to you. I didn't kill the Morgans, and I want you to give me a chance to prove it."

"You mean you want me to side with you—to take your part?"

"No, no, nothing like that. An innocent man don't need to try to corrupt the law. I just want a chance to prove my innocence. What do you say?"

"Just what is it you want me to do?" the sheriff asked.

Not a thing but listen to my story. Then check up on it. If it's true, it'll prove I'm innocent. If it wasn't, I'd be an awful fool to come riding in like this."

"It sounds sensible to me," said Toler. "I'm never afraid to admit if I make a mistake. So pull up a chair and start talking. But first, point that gun somewhere else."

"Oh, the gun." Ed laughed. "I'd forgot all about it. Here, you take it. If I can convince you of my story, you give it back, together with the one you took from me yesterday. Okay?"

"Okay by me," agreed Toler, as he swept the Colt into a drawer of his desk. "Now let's have your story. What are you doing in this country when your normal hangout is Cerro? You gotta admit when a killing comes off, and a strange gunny with a rep like yours who ain't got no business in the territory is found on the premises, it looks mighty suspicious."

"Shore it does," agreed Ed, who had built himself a cigarette and was

puffing at it thoughtfully. "That's why I didn't blame your boys. They are a good bunch, and they had plenty of cause to be mad. I was plenty burned up about it myself.

"The only things they and you didn't know is that my reputation is a phony one for one thing, and I *did* have business in their neighborhood for another.

"About my business—this will explain that." He threw a bill of sale across the desk.

TOLER picked it up and read it. It was all ship-shape and legal and had been notarized in Cerro and a big red seal pasted on.

"So you're the new owner of the Shooting Star," said Toler. "Well, that does make a little difference, but not very much. It explains why you were here, but it doesn't prove you didn't do it."

"I'll come to that," Ed went on smoothly, returning the bill of sale to his pocket. "But first I want to tell you about that reputation. The reason I left Cerro and tried to locate here was to get away from that rep. I'm not a shooting lobo—that is, unless I'm forced to be.

"Yeah, there was shooting in Cerro, all right, but I never drew a gun on a man unless he drew first."

The sheriff raised his eyebrows a little quizzically. "There's nine notches on the gun I took from you yesterday," he reminded Ed. "That's a heap of men to kill if each one got first crack at the draw. You must have been awful lucky!"

"They were more like buzzards than men, and luck had nothing to do with it. I was just a mite faster than they were, and that mite told the story."

"But," the sheriff began, "you want me to believe—"

"No," Ed cut in. "I don't want you to believe anything. I just want you to check on what I say. That'll be easy enough for you. You can get to Cerro and back in two days without even sweating your horse, so you shouldn't have any trouble."

"But even if your story is true, that doesn't give you an out on the Morgan killing," the sheriff persisted.

"No, but it makes the people less sure that I'm the killer. But I got an out on the killing, too, like I told you yesterday. What time did you figger the Morgans were shot?"

"Well," Toler replied, "little Pancho, a Mexican younker, was roaming around in the hills near the house when he heard guns popping. He figured it was about an hour after sundown, which would bring it to around nine o'clock. And the things you pointed out—the blood, and the earth in the pot—point to about the same time. And when Doc looked at the bodies he agreed on that hour."

"Okay," said Ed. "Now what would you say if you found at least a dozen men who could tell you that at nine o'clock that night I was celebrating my leaving with the boys at a bar in Cerro, more than fifty miles away from the Morgan ranch!"

"If that can be proved, I'd be the first to say you're not guilty."

"There's my case, Sheriff," said Ed. "And it won't be hard to prove, because it wasn't till almost eleven o'clock that three gunslicks tried to bust up the party. So everybody who was there will remember. It was after that that I left and rode here."

Toler was plainly puzzled. "I must admit, Brady, that your story sounds convincing, and the fact that you came in voluntarily is even more so. But still, I ain't got nothing but your word to go on, until I can check up on your story. Suppose you stay here in our jail until I send a man to Cerro—"

"You mean you want to arrest me for the Morgan murders anyway?" asked Ed.

"No, I wouldn't call it that. Protective custody would be a better name for it. You know how the boys are—hot-headed. Wouldn't do no good for one of them to take a shot at you before we clear you, would it? And it wouldn't be for more than two days at the outside, like you said yourself."

"Well-ll"—Ed was hesitant—"I ain't never been in cold storage before, but if it's only until a rider can

get to Cerro and back, I guess it'll be all right."

"Fine," approved Toler, slapping his desk heartily. "And I don't mind saying, son, that your willingness to cooperate this way makes me pretty sure you're telling the truth. It would take more foolishness than I give you credit for, for a man to lie or bluff his way into jail. Come on; I'll show you to your cell, and send a man off to Cerro pronto."

THEY stood up, and the sheriff was leading the way to the back part of his office, which had two cells and served as a jail, when the front door opened and a group of dusty, weary looking men entered.

"No luck, Sheriff," called the leader of the group, who was one of the men in the posse which had captured Ed the day before. "We combed the whole north range and there wasn't a sign of him."

Then, as he recognized Brady, his jaw dropped and his eyes popped, and he stood staring for one breathless second.

Then he let out a great shout. "You got him!" He turned to his men. "Toler's got Brady. Go round up the boys and tell them we got the killer!"

His men dashed for the door wildly, and in a second were scattering in all directions, shouting, "We got the killer at the jail house."

Walt Toler shook his head sadly.

"You hadn't ought to've done that, Syd," he said.

"We're going to have him, Walt, and the devil himself won't be able to stop us," his young deputy averred.

Toler walked deliberately to the front door, turned the key in the lock, and then removed it from the door and put it in his pocket.

"That won't help none," said Syd. "They'll bust the door in, and you know it."

The sheriff remained calm. He went to his drawer and took out two guns—Ed's own, and the one he had just given up. He walked over to Ed and put them in his hands.

"Here, Brady," he said. "But I'm asking you not to use them unless you have to."

Young Syd Bean watched these proceedings with wide eyes.

"You're arming a killer!" he said in a tone of amazement.

"Look, Syd," said Toler in a weary but patient tone. "You got to understand this. If I was plumb shore Brady was the Morgan killer, even if I had seen him do it with my own eyes, I wouldn't give him up to a mob. Every man has got a right to a fair trial. That's what our law says. And if I let you and the boys break that law, then you'd be just as much killers as he is, and, by grab, I'd see every one of you swing.

"The law ain't something that you can obey when you feel like it and break whenever you get in the mood to. The law says that a man must be given a fair chance to prove his innocence, and while I represent the law in these parts I aim to see that every man gets that chance. Do you get my point, Syd?"

"Yeah," said Ssyd defiantly. "I understand it, but that don't mean I agree with it. This lobo didn't give the Morgans a chance; why should we give him any?"

"That's where the value of the law comes in, Syd," said the older man gently. "Because personally I don't believe Brady had anything to do with the Morgan killing. How do you imagine you and the boys would feel if we got proof in a day or so that Brady was more than fifty miles from here when the killing took place?"

This was a situation young Syd Bean was unprepared for.

"You mean you really think he's innocent?"

"I do," said Toler, shaking his head soberly. "And I was just about to check on his story when you sent the boys out to rouse a mob."

"Aw, you're just saying that to save his neck. You'd say anything to prevent a hanging."

"You know me better than that, Syd." Toler was still calm and cool. "Have you ever known me to lie to you? Have you ever known me to side with a killer? Do you think I'd

have given him his guns back if I wasn't pretty sure he wouldn't plug us both in the back?"

"N-no," Syd faltered. "But gosh, this puts us in an awful hole. The mob's collecting outside now. I can hear them pounding at the front door. What are we going to do?"

"I'm going to stay here with Brady, while you go out and try to quiet them down. I know it's pretty hard to talk sense to a crowd when they've got lynching on the brain, but that's what you'll have to do. If you can get a couple of the boys on your side right at the start, you may be able to influence the crowd, especially if you start right now, before it gets too big. What do you say? Willing to try?"

"I don't see any other way," answered Syd. "Come on; open the door for me and let me out."

TOLER took the key from his pocket and opened the door just wide enough to let Syd Bean slide through, then hastily closed and locked it again.

"Whew," said Ed Brady, wiping his head with his handkerchief. "I thought for a minute, back in the beginning there, that he was going to throw his gun on both of us."

He walked over and took Toler by the hand. "I want you to know, Sheriff, no matter what happens, I think you're one square hombre. And I won't forget it."

"'Tain't nothing personal about it, Brady," denied the sheriff. "I'm just doing my duty under the law, and when the day comes that I can't do that duty, I'll be taking money under false pretenses. I'd rather turn in my star first."

"Yeah," agreed Brady. "But just the same, it would make it lots easier and safer for you to turn me over. That's what Syd Bean would do if he was sheriff."

"No, I don't think he would, Brady. Syd's really a good sound boy once he gets over his hotheadedness. And as for taking the safe and easy way, them as is looking for that path should never run for sheriff, 'cause there ain't nothing safe or easy in that job nohow."

The sound of the crowd had become louder, and Toler suggested, "Let's get near the windows and see how Syd is making out. Maybe he'll be able to convince them to go home." But the look in his eyes plainly said that this was a hope he did not have much confidence in.

Through the open window they could hear Syd Bean haranguing the mob.

"But I tell you, we got to give him a chance to prove it," he was shouting.

A deep voice from the crowd answered, "So you're backing the killer against us, hey, Syd?"

"But we want to make sure that he *is* the killer," Syd answered.

And again the deep voice carried over the others of the crowd, this time saying, "We're sure, and when we get our hands on him we'll make him admit it before we swing him."

"Now listen, fellers," Syd started again, and went into a long, convincing argument about the law and about hanging a man who might be proved innocent; but each time he stopped for breath the man with the deep, sonorous voice would put in his say, spoiling the whole effect of Syd's argument.

"That hyena with the deep voice," Toler explained to Ed Brady, "is Lew Kelton. Got a lot of influence around here. Big ranch owner. He seems set on a lynching. If the feeling gets any worse, I'm agonna have to take steps."

The feeling did get worse. Slowly it mounted under Kelton's urging and heckling, and, despite Syd's pleading and arguments, until finally the boy was swept off the steps of the office and the leaders of the mob began pounding on the door in earnest.

A moment later several rocks came crashing through the window.

Sheriff Toler shook his head. "They're getting out of hand. I'll have to stop them now or there won't be no stopping them. I'm going out. Lock the door after me."

He went to the door with a gun in each hand and swung it open. The crowd began a rush to press their way forward, but found those two

forty-fives pressed into the leaders' bellies.

"Step back a mite, boys," said old Walt coolly. "I want to talk to you." And he suited the action to the word by pressing forward, guns held firm.

The crowd gave way slightly before him; just enough for Ed to swing the door closed and lock it.

TOLER looked over the heads of the crowd until he spotted Kelton, who was standing fairly well back.

He held up his hand for silence; and when the mob had quieted down a little, he pointed to Kelton. "You," he called out, and his voice carried to every shouting man, though it was calm and without excitement. "You, Lew Kelton!"

The crowd turned to look at Kelton to see why he was being singled out, and grew almost completely quiet. It was a good psychological trick for gaining their attention.

"What do you want, Sheriff?" asked Kelton, his deep voice clear.

"You want to lynch my prisoner. Is that right?" Toler asked.

"Well," Kelton drawled, "I ain't partial to the word lynch. I like hanging better. And that seems to be the feeling of the crowd, ain't it, boys?"

The mob let out a roar of approval.

"Why, Kelton?" And the sheriff's voice, though still soft, had a sharpness that easily cut through the shouting. The question exploded like a gunshot.

"Why?" Kelton seemed puzzled. "I don't know what you mean."

"Why do you want to lynch Ed Brady, Kelton?" The words lashed out like a whip, and Kelton began to show signs of feeling uncomfortable.

"Why pick on me?" he asked. "The whole crowd wants to lynch—hang him because he murdered old Mr and Mrs Morgan in cold blood."

The mention of the murder of the old couple seemed to flame the anger of the crowd anew.

The sheriff let them shout for a few minutes to get the anger out of their systems; then he said slowly but sharply, cutting each word clear so that it could sink in, "I do not think Ed Brady killed the Morgans. I have reason to believe that he was in Cerro at the time of the killing. I shall know for sure within a day or two. Meanwhile I ask you to leave here quietly."

There was silence for a few seconds, then a low hum of voices as the men discussed Toler's request with one another.

Over the buzz Toler could hear Kelton's voice, which boomed even when he whispered.

"He's stalling to gain time," Kelton was saying. "If we leave now, he'll take Brady to some hideaway to keep us from getting him. Toler knows just as well as we do that that lobo is as guilty as hell. He wasn't no more in Cerro at the killing time than I was."

Walt Toler's heart sank. If enough men sided with Kelton, they would rush the office, and that would mean useless bloodshed, for the sheriff was resolved not to give up his prisoner without a fight.

More and more men seemed to be swaying toward Kelton's point of view, when a lone horseman clattered down the street and pulled up in the midst of the crowd.

He had a clean-shaven face with sideburns, such as lawyers and judges affected, and wore a black alpaca suit, freshly pressed, and a newly laundered white shirt with a little black shoestring bow tie. A broad black hat topped off the outfit.

He was short and fat, but he had an air of dignity about him which commanded respect.

"Pardon me, boys," the stranger called in a well modulated and impressive voice. "But would you mind directing me to your sheriff? I'm a visitor from Cerro, and I should like to pay my respects to him."

"Cerro?" "You from Cerro?" the calls rang out. "Now we can check on Brady." "Hey, Sheriff, this hombre's from Cerro."

The Judge, for this strange vision of cleanliness and dignity was indeed he, made his way toward Toler, the crowd pressing at his heels.

"Howdy, Sheriff." He extended his

hand affably. "I am the Judge from Cerro and I have come to pay my respects."

To himself he was saying, "That's no lie. Everybody knows me as the Judge. Can I help it if these boys believe I actually am a judge instead of only having it as a nickname?"

TOLER grasped his hand warmly and said, "Come inside, Judge. I want to talk to you," and began to turn to the door.

But the crowd shouted in protest. "Ask him now. We want to hear what he says."

Toler shook his head in resignation.

"All right," he agreed. "I guess you're entitled to know."

"Just what is the problem?" asked the Judge in his finest judicial manner.

"It's about the whereabouts of a certain party at a certain time," answered Toler. "Would you mind answering a few questions, publicly?"

"I shall be happy to render any assistance at my command," said the Judge with a flowery gesture.

"All right," said the sheriff. "Now first, when did you leave Cerro?"

"Early yesterday morning."

"Then you were there night before last?"

"I was."

"Good. Now, do you know a gunny named Ed Brady?"

"Gunny?" The Judge's eyebrows went up. "I know a very estimable young man by that name, but I would not designate him as a gunny. True, he has been forced to make use of firearms at times, but always on the side of justice and righteousness."

"Stow the gab," cried the crowd. "Get to the point."

"Now tell us this," Toler asked. "Was Brady in Cerro night before last at nine o'clock?"

"He was indeed," said the Judge flatly. "I remember it clearly because I had some—uh—private business that took me to the bar, and Brady and his friends were there throwing a party in honor of his leavetaking. He left shortly after eleven to head for your delightful valley."

Toler heaved a sigh of relief, and the crowd began to fidget uneasily.

"One more thing. Brady told me something else I want to check on, just to see if his story is true all the way. He said something happened while he was celebrating at the bar. Do you remember anything special?"

"Indeed I do," replied the Judge. "Three masked gunslicks came in and tried to take Brady, but with my help they were foiled in the attempt."

"It checks, boys," called Walt to the crowd. "Every bit of it checks. Now get on home and we'll forget all about your nonsense."

And ignoring the remains of the once dangerous mob, Toler turned to the door.

"I would like to see my young friend, if you could direct me to him," said the Judge.

"He's right in here," replied the sheriff, knocking on the door and calling for Ed to open up. "And your coming along when you did saved him from a mighty dangerous situation."

"My, my," said the Judge in mock surprise. "How fortunate I just happened by."

The door swung open and Toler entered.

"Got a friend of yours here to see you, Brady," he said as the Judge followed him in.

A look of incredulity spread over Ed's face as he saw the Judge's get-up.

"Judge," he gasped. "Judge!"

"Yes, my young friend, it's the Judge. Had you not better pull in your eyes? They bid fair to pop out of your head."

"But the clothes—the hat—the shave!" Ed gasped. "You look so different. Why, I ain't never seen you with a shave or a clean shirt in all the time I've know you!"

Toler asked suspiciously, "You mean he ain't what he says?"

"Allow me to explain. I am known as the Judge, but I have not practiced at that profession for many years. I have only recently reclaimed myself from among those souls who

think more of their thirst than of their honor. But every word I told you out there was the truth, judge or no judge."

Toler was scratching his head and grinning. "I believe it was. And just to show you how much I believe it, Brady, I'm letting you go, providing I can find you at the Shooting Star if I want you. And I'll double check on your story by sending Syd Bean to question the boys over at Cerro."

"Thanks, Sheriff." Ed gripped his hand. "I won't forget this. And you can count on me to help find the real killers of the Morgans."

"Looks like I'll be needing help, all right," said Toler, leading them to the door.

CHAPTER VI

THOUGH the mob had dispersed when they left the sheriff's office, there were still a good many men hanging about in the street.

Among them was the man known as Lew Kelton. Kelton seemed to have been waiting for them, for when Ed and the Judge came out, he left the group he was talking with and sidled over to them.

He ws large and broad and would have been a handsome man if it had not been for his two incisor teeth, which protruded from his mouth and had earned for him the name of Fang Tooth from his intimates.

He approached with hand extended, saying, "Howdy, strangers; welcome to Cochetopa."

Ed Brady had no trouble recognizing the booming voice which had urged the crowd into a lynching hysteria. Yet now the man was all smiles and friendliness.

"Different breed from Ruffer," thought Ed. "And more dangerous, because he's smart enough to mask his real feelings."

He took the proffered hand, and had his own wrung with what he thought was unnecessary vigor. "Wants to impress me with his strength," he thought, and squeezed the paw in his hand while he pumped it up and down, until Kelton hastily withdrew it.

"Thanks for the welcome," said Ed. "But you didn't seem to feel that way half an hour ago."

Kelton waved the remark aside airily. "Think nothing of that, man," he boomed. "Half an hour ago everyone in town was convinced that you were a dangerous killer. Naturally you received a cool reception."

"And now?" asked Ed.

"Well, now most people think maybe they made a mistake," Kelton answered.

"Maybe?"

"Sure." And Kelton's voice was booming so that everyone on the street heard him. "Of course, some of them are sure it was all a mistake, but some still feel a little suspicious. Remember, they know about your reputation in Cerro, and after all, you *was* discovered on the Morgan ranch right after the killing. Naturally, there's folks who still ain't sure what to think."

"He's trying to plant suspicion in the minds of all these people," Ed thought, and he felt a glow of anger rising in him against this loud-voiced man. But Kelton was talking on.

"As for me, I always say give a man a chance to prove himself before you judge him. And by the way, my name is Lew Kelton. I own a lot of ranch land hereabouts. The Bar K, which lies alongside of your Shooting Star on the east, is one of mine. So we're really to be neighbors."

Ed grunted a noncommittal reply. He wanted to get away from Kelton, for there was something about the veiled hypocrisy of the big man that told him that too much time in his company would bring about a showdown.

"Well," he said, "it's nice to know you, and I hope that next time I see you, you won't be hollering for my neck. I have to be getting on. Gotta stock up on supplies for the Star."

"Before you do that, I'd like to talk to you about your ranch," Kelton said. "If it ain't too personal a question, what did you pay for it?"

"It's no secret," Brady replied, "so I don't see why I shouldn't tell you, even if it ain't exactly your business. I paid three thousand in cash and another ten in notes."

Kelton shook his head. "In a manner of speaking it is my business, because I was interested in that ranch. I was ready to make old man Tebbets an offer for it, but he could never be found. He didn't live at the ranch house for almost a year before he left. Too bad, too, because I was prepared to offer him a better price than he got for it. But"—he slapped Ed on the back heartily—"his loss is your gain. "I'll take over the notes and give you five thousand cash, for immediate possession. You make two thousand clear on the deal. We can go down to the bank and settle it right now."

HE HAD Ed's arm in his and began moving down the street toward the bank building, with the Judge trailing alongside.

Ed pulled his arm free and faced Kelton. "No go, Kelton; I'm not selling."

"Not selling!" There was real surprise in the rancher's face and voice. "You mean you won't take a two thousand dollar profit on a three thousand dollar investment?" And as Ed nodded his head, "But why not?"

"Because," Brady told him, "I didn't buy the Shooting Star for an investment or for speculation. I bought it because I wanted a place to live and work, and after having seen it, I like it and want to live there."

"Well, I'll be hanged for a hoss thief," ejaculated Kelton. "Here I was figgering you for a plain honest waddy, and all the while you're baiting me on. You know how to hold on for a rise in price as well as a blasted banker. But all right—I want that ranch, so I'll offer seven thousand!"

Ed ignored the long speech and merely replied, "Not selling."

"Ten thousand!"

Ed Brady was becoming more and more exasperated. "Listen, Kelton," he said, "and get me straight. This ain't no auction. The Shooting Star is my ranch and my home, and I ain't selling if you offer a hundred thousand. I'm aiming to keep it and live there."

The incredulity on Kelton's face deepened. "But you could get plenty of other ranches, better ranches, biggr ranches, just on the profit I'm offering."

"So could you," Ed replied. "If it's worth that much to you, I reckon it's worth at least that much to me. I'm staying." And he turned to leave.

But Kelton would have none of that. "Looky here, Brady," he said, and his voice still boomed, but it had a sharp edge to it. "You may be a big man in Cerro, but you're in Cochetopa now, and this is *my* stamping ground. And I usually get my way around here."

"I noticed that," Ed answered coolly, "when you almost convinced the crowd to string me up. But you didn't get your way about that, Kelton, and you ain't going to get your way about the Shooting Star either."

Kelton's lips were bared and his fang teeth stuck out, giving him a wolfish appearance.

"I'll have my way in the end, Brady, and you'll be sorry you bucked me."

"Come on, Judge." Ed turned to his companion. "This blustering is fair turning my stomach."

Kelton seemed to throw discretion to the winds. He put a restraining hand on Brady's shoulder and almost shouted, "There's still plenty of ropes in Cochetopa anxious to get around your neck, Brady."

"And you'll see that one of them gets there, I suppose?"

"You're damn tootin', I will. And before very long, too."

THE Judge felt he had to put in a word. "This person"—he nodded toward Kelton—"has neither respect for good manners, nor hospitality, nor the legal technicalities of business. So I would suggest"—and here he dropped all his dignity—"I suggest you slug him, Ed old boy—knock some brains into that rattling thing he calls a head."

Kelton's arm was still clutching Ed's shoulder. Ed tried to take it off, saying, "Better cool off, Kelton, before starting something you may not be able to finish."

But Kelton's hand seemed to have frozen to the shoulder and, instead of

releasing it, he proceeded to shake Ed vigorously. He was much heavier than the young redhead, though not quite so tall.

"Take your hand off, Kelton." Brady warned, but instead of obeying, Kelton in his wrath shook harder.

Then something happened. A great light seemed to explode and shatter into a million bits of stardust right before his eyes. His head reeled and his hands dropped. He stood dazedly shaking himself for a moment, then said in a surprised voice:

"You hit me!"

"Yeah," Ed agreed. "Just an easy tap to teach you to keep your paws off me."

"You hit me!" Kelton screeched, full of the ignominy of it. "You hit me!"

His face was as red as Brady's flaming hair, and he waved his arms wildly.

Ed stood quietly, waiting for the next move.

Choking with fury, the heavy man shouted, "No man can hit Lew Kelton and live to brag about it." And with arms flailing he came rushing at Ed.

That was the beginning of what residents spoke of in awed tones, long after, as "the fight."

Ed Brady stepped nimbly aside as Kelton rushed him, and planted a solid jab on the heavier man's jaw as he passed. This infuriated Kelton all the more, and again he rushed, trying to get his bearish arms around Ed's more slender frame.

Ed was slender, but with firmness of a steel spring. Tough as the leather of his saddle, he was also extremely fast and agile in his movements. He had the advantage of speed over Kelton, but his adversary was not slow by any means, he outweighed Ed by a good twenty-five pounds, and there was not an ounce of fat on his huge, broad frame. An outdoor life had toughened him, as it had Ed Brady.

Three times Kelton made his rushes, and three times he found himself clutching nothing but air, and with a sting from one of Ed's blows where it had connected in passing.

Then he slowed down and paused for a moment. This fight, he realized, would call for different tactics. Obviously Ed could not easily be rushed off his feet. He beat down his fury and planned his strategy anew.

Ed, on his part, realized that he was in for a hard fight. When he let his left fist go, somebody usually dropped. Yet Kelton had taken four of these blows and had shaken them off with little apparent effect on himself.

In fighting under rules, Ed could have won easily on the strength of his superior speed and leg work, but this was a different kind of fight. There were no rules here, with one exception: the fighters would not use their guns; everything else went.

THE crowd had formed a wide circle around the combatants.

Kelton stalked Ed around the ring, not rushing blindly, but forcing the fight on the lighter man. Ed continued to move backward, but every time Kelton came within range, Ed's fist would dart out and faultlessly find a landing place. Blood was gushing from Kelton's nose and lips before the affair was five minutes old, but still he kept boring in, aiming to get his arms around Ed.

Then, whether Brady tripped accidentally or was deliberately tripped by the boot of someone in the crowd, he never knew. All he knew was that he was down and Kelton was rushing at him with his heavy boot set to kick.

"Here's where I kick your brains out," he grated, and had he kicked then instead of waiting to gloat for a second his prophecy might have come true, for at that moment Ed was defenseless. But that second's delay made all the difference. Ed had the time to squirm aside, and when the blow landed, instead of being full on the temple, as Kelton had planned it to be, it was a grazing blow which ripped into Brady's cheek and chin and glanced off without completely stunning him.

It shook him considerably, however, and hurt with a raw, aching pain. But almost by instinct, Ed reached his feet before Kelton could

kick again, and then in a surprise move threw himself into a clinch with Kelton. His opponent tried to free himself in every way he knew, in order to administer the final touches of the beating while Ed was groggy, but the lighter man kept his arms tied up until he had shaken his head clear. Then he pushed away, and in the pushing released a swing that connected mightily with Kelton's already puffed up nose.

Again the chase began, but now both men were bleeding freely. Ed's footwork was not what it had been, for the kick in the head had taken its toll, but still he managed to keep out of arm's reach of Kelton, while inflicting terrible damage with his whip-like left.

Despite the terrific pounding he had received, Kelton continued to bore in with unrelenting energy. Brady could not help but admire his stamina.

Then, in a surprise move, Kelton leaped. Clear off his feet he went in a cat-like jump which could hardly be expected from a man of his size and weight. Ed met the leap with both fists, but did not have time to retreat before it, and at last Kelton had what he had been striving for—his arms wrapped around Ed's body.

But here again he was doomed to disappointment. He had thought that by such tactics he could use his superior weight to crush the resistance from his more slender foe. But you can't break a steel spring by pressing it. It just jumps back harder. And that is precisely what Kelton found, for by a deft twist of his body, Ed sent the larger man hurtling through the air to land on his back ten feet away.

Kelton was on his feet again almost immediately. He seemed possessed by a fury which could not acknowledge defeat. One eye was completely closed, the other puffing up, his nose bleeding profusely and his lips slashed and puffed, but still he fought on relentlessly, seemingly as strong as when he started. Ed, on the other hand, though hit much less often, was bleeding profusely from his cut and raw cheek, and felt that he was weakening perceptibly.

He decided to stop his defensive tactics and go on the offensive, for he knew that he had to finish this fight soon or go down to defeat. Instead of retreating before Kelton's advance, he stood his ground and traded blow for blow, pushing the surprised Kelton, who had begun thinking of him as a "runaway" fighter, backward.

Left and right, the blows went home—to jaw, to eye, to stomach—and these were blows not even Kelton could pass off lightly. Soon the heavy man was puffing and panting, but unfortunately for Ed, so was he.

NOW Kelton dove into a clinch, and by use of weight and force, wrestled Brady to the ground. They rolled over and over on the ground, their free flowing blood mingling and darkening the arena; each trying to remain on top—each trying to get in a decisive blow.

At one time Kelton's clawing fingers found Ed's eyes and began gouging, and only a sharp quick blow on the point of the chin from Brady saved that young man's eyesight.

But Ed was weakening fast and he knew it. That kick in the head had done something to him, and he was unable to shake off its effects. He tried to get off the ground and on to his feet again, feeling that he would have a better chance to keep away from Kelton's pounding that way. He could not accomplish this until he was able to get to the top of the heap, and then when he did manage it, he found to his dismay that his legs were wobbly and would hardly hold him.

Kelton had risen too, and stood with his head tilted askew so as to be able to see through the slit of one eye which still remained open. He could see Ed wavering, and a roar of triumph rose in his throat as he advanced to the kill. And none too soon, for in a few minutes more his remaining eye would be completely closed and he would be at the mercy of Brady.

But now he still had sight and Brady was obviously out on his feet.

He advanced gloatingly, slowly, deliberately. "Now I got you, Brady," he gritted through blood-soaked teeth.

Ed pulled himself together. Just one more good punch, he prayed silently, just one more.

Kelton advanced, disdainful of anything Brady might do, and left himself wide open for the tremendous roundhouse swing which Ed brought up and around from his knees with every ounce of the remaining force in his body. It was perfectly timed, and exploded like a ton of dynamite on Kelton's jaw, with the force of a mallet on the head of a steer.

A dazed expression appeared on the heavy man's face, and his one open eyelid quivered; then he fell face forward onto the ground and was still.

A shout arose from the crowd, and willing hands, with the Judge's most prominent among them, helped Ed to a place where he could wash up. Though some might still distrust him, they could not help but admire the valiant fight he had fought.

A few men went forward and dragged the inanimate hulk of Kelton away.

An hour later Brady, cleaned and washed and showing no ill effects from the fight except a long plaster where his cheek had been slit open, was walking down toward the general store with the Judge, to stock up on provisions for the Shooting Star.

CHAPTER VII

"I DON'T like it, Ed," the Judge was saying. "Things are stacked against you here."

"I don't know, Judge. The sheriff is a square guy and he seems right friendly."

"Yes, but he's only one man, and Kelton has a flock of jaspers working for him who're tough hombres. You sure do have a habit of accumulating enemies, though I must admit you pick ones a man can be proud of."

Ed grinned. "That Kelton nearly had me. If he hadn't opened up for that last punch, you'd still be trying to bring me to."

"But Kelton ain't the only one we got to worry about around here," the Judge persisted. "Remember the three jaspers that dragged him away? No, you wouldn't. You wasn't seeing so good yourself then. But I did. I got a good look at them. And I'll swear on a case of Mount Vernon they was the same jaspers as stuck us up that night in Cerro."

"You absolutely sure of that, Judge? How could you tell? They were wearing masks then."

"Yeah, but the masks didn't cover the floppy ears of one of them. He was standing right in front of me, and I noticed how they flapped like fans. And the other one had heavy eyebrows that met in the middle. And the third was as slight as a boy. That description fits the men who took Kelton away like a glove. I'd take my oath on it."

Ed Brady was thoughtful and silent for a moment. Then, "You see what it means if you're right, Judge? It means Kelton sent them to Cerro to get me."

The Judge pumped his head vigorously.

"Yep—it means just that and more. It means that he's got some reason for wanting to get you out of the way. That's why he tried to get you strung up. And it also means, after the beating you gave him, he's going to hate you all the more. He's never going to let up until he does get you."

"Well," asked Ed, "what should we do about it?"

"Under ordinary conditions I'd say stay and fight it out. But we ain't here under ordinary conditions. You're here because you wanted to get away from fighting and gunplay, and I feel the same way about it. Also, we're strangers in a town where Kelton is powerful. So under those circumstances, I say—" He hesitated.

"Yes?" Ed urged him gently.

"Well, I hate to say it, Ed, but I think the best thing would be to sell the Shooting Star and move on. We can locate somewhere else where it's really peaceful."

Ed shook his head mildly. "That's just what Kelton wants," he said. "If we left now, he'd be the winner."

"Better for him to be the winner and you to stay alive for a while," retorted the Judge.

"No!" This time Ed was decisive. "Kelton wants to run me out for some reason. He was even willing to pay me big money for the ranch to get me to leave. I'm staying, at least until I find out what's in back of it all."

"It's your funeral," replied the Judge, with a shrug of his shoulders.

"But you don't have to stay, Judge," Ed added. "You can ramble if you don't think it's safe."

"Me leave you when you're in danger?" replied the Judge in a hurt tone. "No, no, my boy, you need someone to look after you, and that someone is me!"

"Okay, Judge," grinned Ed. "Let's forget all about it, then. Here's the store. We'll stock up for a long stay."

THE store carried everything from saddles and Winchesters to toothpicks and sardines.

The owner was a wiry looking little Irishman with bristly cheeks named Tim O'Shea. He greeted them cordially.

"Ain't you the young feller that just give Lew Kelton the beating of his life?" he asked, addressing himself to Ed.

"Well, I'm the feller that fought him," admitted Brady modestly, "but he handed me something of a beating, too."

"Bosh," sneered the storekeeper. "One of his men tripped you, and when you were down he kicked you in the head. I saw it. If it wasn't for that, he wouldn't have laid a hand on you. Boy, that's some left hook you got. Best I ever seed, I reckon. I shut up the shop and came arunning to watch. And I'm mighty glad"—he lowered his voice—"that someone finally gave Kelton what's coming to him."

"Isn't he liked around here?" asked the Judge, wanting to get as much information as he could about their enemy.

"Well, yes and no. There's some that look up to him because he's about the richest man around—richest in money and richest in land. Then there's others that's afeared of him, for he's a hard man who crushes, once he gets someone in his power. Then there's a few has had the guts to stand up to him, but he's beaten them all in turn and usually ends up by owning their spreads. Last one to fight him was old Jefferson Wells, and with him gone his gal Susan is keeping up the fight."

Ed's ears went up.

"You mean Susan Wells of the Diamond O?" he asked.

"That's the one. Neighbor of yours. Kelton's pushing her. I don't know what for, but I know they's bad blood between them."

"Now," said Ed to the Judge, "I know I'm staying here. No power on earth could drag me away."

They bought a bag of beans and a sack of flour and a dozen other items the Judge selected, then made their way to their horses. The day was almost finished, and dusk had already fallen as they left Cochetopa without further incident and took the trail to the Shooting Star.

ED THRILLED to the beauty of the country as the stars began to twinkle and the softly rounded hills stood out against a majestic full moon.

Ed turned to the Judge. "Do you feel it the way I do?" he asked.

"Uh huh," replied the Judge. "That feeling of power and strength and bigness, and at the same time the touch of softness and beauty—it gets in your blood."

Ed nodded in agreement. "I wish I could put words to work the way you do, Judge; but even if I can't explain it, I feel it. It's open and free, and I'd rather live here and be poor than the richest man wearing store clothes in some tight big city."

The Judge just nodded his agreement as they cantered on into the silvery night.

Suddenly the Judge pulled in sharply and grabbed at Brady's sleeve.

"Look!" he whispered hoarsely, pointing off into the distance.

A figure had emerged and seemed to be floating across the range. Full in the moonlight, it seemed covered with a whitish cloak from head to foot.

The Judge's teeth were chattering.

"If that ain't a ghost," he said, "it's as close as I ever want to get to one. Floating along that way!"

"Nonsense," said his companion. "It's not floating—it's riding a horse. But the horse is black, so you don't see it."

"What of it?" the Judge insisted. "If the rider can be a ghost, why can't the horse?"

"So there really is a White Rider," Ed mused. "I thought it was just an old wives' tale."

"Ed"—the Judge's voice was pleading—"let's get out of here. Let's go back to Cerro, where ghosts don't ride at night."

"Curious, all right." Ed hadn't even heard the Judge. "It's something else for us to look into. We'll have to catch that White Rider, Judge. I'll bet it would be able to explain lots of things."

"Catch it?" There was horror in the Judge's voice. "Catch it? I'm going to do everything in my power to keep it from catching me. I don't want no truck with ghosts!"

Ed smiled at his fat companion.

"You're as bad as a kid that's scared by ghost stories. When we catch up with that thing, we'll have time to decide if it's man or spirit. And I'll lay big odds that there's a man under that white cloak."

The apparition was far in the distance, and heading for the timber across the range. Soon it was out of sight. The Judge heaved a sigh of relief.

"Maybe you're right, Ed," he said, "but I was scared by a ghost when I was a little shaver and I never got over it. So if you want to go ghost chasing, go right ahead, but count me out."

They jogged onward and were soon at the bypath which led to the Shooting Star.

"It's agonna feel good to sleep in my own house," said Ed in anticipation.

"It'd feel still better if the house was a coupla hundred miles from here," answered the Judge.

AS THEY were about to dismount, Ed grabbed his companion's arm and said loudly, "Let's ride the horses right to the corral."

"But—" The Judge began to argue, for they were as near to the corral as they could get.

"Come on, Judge, right over here." And the Judge followed, shrugging his shoulders, for Brady had already ridden behind a small tool shed which was in the opposite direction from the corral.

When he caught up with his partner, he tried to explain. "The corral ain't this way. It's over there where we was before."

"I know," Ed said. "But there's something more there, too. I saw it moving in the darkness."

"An ambush!"

"Looks like drygulchers, all right," Ed agreed. "We come near to riding right smack into them. And they're covering the entrance to the house, it looks like to me."

"Boy, oh boy," grumbled the Judge. "There is no place like Cochetopa for peace and quiet."

"Quit grumbling and start thinking," said Ed. "We got to find out how many there are and figger how to get rid of them."

"We could tear right into them, pushing bullets ahead of us."

"No," said Ed wisely. "They wouldn't be out in the open. They'll have cover of some kind. And we don't even know where they're spotted. Even the one I saw may have moved. So we'd be shooting blind, while our gunfire would give away our position. That's just what they would want."

'Then what are we going to do?"

"Wait a minute—let me think."

"I got it," he said a moment later. "They're looking for us to come from the front. If we can make a big circle and get to the back of the house, we can creep up on them from their rear

and surprise them, like they was trying to surprise us."

"Anything you say," agreed the Judge taking out his gun.

"But," Ed went on, "we'll have to work fast, because they'll get suspicious soon. They heard us ride over here, and they may come looking for us."

The Judge nodded his agreement and they were off. They circled widely, using the shelter of every possible shadow, and soon had gained the rear of the house.

"It all depends," Ed whispered, "on whether they posted a man at the back or not."

But Ed's assumption that the rear would be left unguarded was correct, for they encountered no one who might give the alarm as to their coming.

"We'll separate now," Ed whispered. "You circle the house from the right, and I'll take it from the left. We'll try to get them between our cross-fire."

"Right." The Judge was eager for action.

"And be careful," Ed warned. "Good luck."

THE few yards from the rear to the front of the house took them longer than the long circle had, for they used every possible caution not to warn the drygulchers of their advance.

The Judge, after wriggling his way inch by inch, found himself near the front, with a big rain barrel, that just seemed made to order for protection, looming up in front of him. He crouched behind it and waited for a sign from Ed.

Ed, on his side of the house, had reached the front, and was trying to pierce through the gloom with his bright eyes.

The moon brightened the land where its rays fell, but unfortunately its light came from behind the house, throwing the front into utter darkness.

The brightness of the surrounding terrain helped to blind him in the shadows. But, he thought, the drygulchers will have that same trouble. They won't be able to see us any better than we can see them.

He decided to crawl a little further to the front and inched his way around. Slowly, with painstaking care, he squirmed along, feeling every bit of the ground ahead of him with outstretched hand before moving on to it.

About ten feet in, his hand went out exploring, and touched something that moved. The slight feel he had of it told him it was a shoe! There was another man lying prone directly ahead of him.

A low whisper came out of the darkness. "That you, Speed?"

Ed grunted a reply which he hoped would pass muster, then held his breath, waiting.

But apparently the drygulcher was satisfied that it was his comrade, Speed, for he made no further move.

Brady continued to advance slowly, making sure his hat was covering his face and his red hair.

Soon he was abreast of the other man, who turned and whispered, "What did you find out? Where'd they go?"

Ed pressed his gun firmly into the drygulcher's ribs. "One yelp and you're a corpse," he whispered. He could feel the man's body sag with fear in the darkness. He reached over and took the gun from quivering fingers.

"How many more are there?" he demanded, his lips close to his victim's ear.

No answer.

"How many?" And he accompanied the demand with pressure of his gun.

"Two."

"Where are they placed?"

"Over there." The fear-stricken gunny nodded toward the shadows to the side.

"Who sent you?" Ed demanded to know.

No answer.

Again the pressure of the gun, the repeated demand.

"I can't tell you. I'll be killed sure if I talk."

"And you'll be killed sure if you don't, only sooner. You ain't got

much choice. Who sent you?" he insisted inexorably.

His captive was becoming hysterical with fear, and his voice mounted shrilly.

"I can't tell you—I can't."

His voice was heard, for from the distance came the low call: "Is that you, Kid?"

"Answer him!" ordered Ed Brady, but fear had made his victim speechless.

"Kid!" the other voice called. "If that's you, better sing out, 'cause in a minute I'm gonna let fly."

But still the Kid gulped and panted without a word passing his lips.

Ed took the warning and nimbly wriggled around so that the Kid's body acted as a breastworks for him.

None too soon, for a spurt of shots cut through the darkness and cut across the grass tops in the very place he had been lying a moment before.

THE shot did more than all Ed's threats had been able to accomplish. It galvanized the terror-stricken Kid into action—and sound.

With a fearful shriek he jumped to his feet, before Ed could grab at him. The thought of lying there and intercepting bullets meant for Brady had been more than he could stand; but rising when he did, he accomplished exactly that purpose, for his form, darker than the surrounding darkness, gave his fellow drygulcher something to draw a bead on.

Another flash and Ed could hear the disgusting little "pung" as the hot, speed-driven little leaden pellet entered firm but yielding human flesh.

The Kid's shriek turned to a muffled groan, as he sank back to earth.

The Judge had seen the two shots, and had the spot they came from covered, but withheld his fire, for he had no way of knowing who it was that had shot. He was taking no chances of plugging Ed Brady by mistake.

Ed recognized the difficulty and came to a quick decision. "After them, Judge," he shouted. "We got one, and there's two more."

His voice called forth another shot, and once more he felt the body of the Kid jerk and quiver as it stopped the bullet. But another shot answered that, and, looking closely at the point from which it had come, Ed was sure he could make out the short, squat figure of the Judge.

As he looked, two guns blazed in that direction from different points, and he saw the Judge collapse in the darkness.

His own smoke stick went to work, but the attackers had apparently decided that discretion was the better part of valor, for he could hear their footsteps running rapidly.

He emptied his own gun and the Kid's after the retreating sounds, but the darkness covered them well, and in a moment he heard two horses galloping away.

He jumped up and ran to the prostrate form of the Judge, but when he got there he found that it wasn't the Judge at all, but the empty rain barrel which had been overturned.

FROM around the corner of the house walked the Judge, without a mark on him, saying, "Well, we drove them off, all right."

Ed Brady let out a big breath. "Judge, you old buzzard, I was sure I saw you fall. I thought you were done for."

"Oh, that!" The Judge pointed to the barrel. "I was behind that, thinking how lucky I was to have such good cover, when those bullets came zinging by and went whist, right through the barrel and almost spit in my eye. I took it for granted the barrel was full of water that would stop the bullets, but when I found it was empty, I jumped around the corner fast. I accidentally dumped the barrel over while I was jumping. Who was hurt? I heard someone scream like he was hit!"

"One of the bullets meant for me got one of their own men, I think bad. C'mon, let's see if there's time to get any information out of him."

They found the Kid where he had fallen. He was unconscious, and his breathing was hardly discernible, but there was still life in him.

They quickly carried him into the house and, after getting some light, laid him across the kitchen table and examined his wounds. One bullet had torn away part of his throat—the other had entered his chest slightly above the heart.

"Not a chance of saving him," said Ed Brady. "Either one of the shots is bad enough to be fatal."

The Kid's eyes fluttered open for a moment, and he saw the two men working over him.

"No use," he mumbled. "I'm done."

"Looks that way, Kid," agreed Ed. "And so long as you don't have to worry now about them getting you, you can tell us who sent you."

"You're a—square—guy," panted the Kid. "You coulda — shot — me down—cold—out there."

"I don't kill unless I have to," said Ed.

"Square—guy," repeated the Kid. "I'll—talk for a square—guy. It was —it—" He shuddered and coughed, and a bloody foam settled on his lips as he fell back. The Kid was dead!

"Damn!" said Ed Brady. "Another minute and we'd know the truth about this business. Not that I don't know who was behind the drygulching. If Lew Kelton didn't send those gunnies, I'll—I'll eat my hat."

"You're prob'ly right," agreed the Judge. "Cause the Kid was one of the gang that tried to get you in Cerro and who helped Kelton after the fight. Still, I would have liked to have had it from him straight, instead of having to guess at it.

"What are we going to do with the corpse?" added the Judge.

"I figger we better leave it till morning; then one of us can ride in and report it to the sheriff."

"And sleep down here with that thing?"

"Oh, I forgot, Judge. You don't like ghosts and corpses. Well, there's rooms upstairs, ain't there? We could sleep up there."

"I guess so," replied the Judge, "but I ain't never investigated. Let's go see what's there."

ED CARRIED the lamp and preceded the Judge up. There were three rooms on the second floor. Ed looked into the first and called out in surprise:

"You sure you ain't been up here, Judge?"

"That's right," said his companion. "I ain't set foot on those stairs before. Why?"

"Because," Ed replied thoughtfully, "somebody has been living up here, and not very long ago, at that."

"Maybe it was the old guy you bought the place from."

"No, he hadn't lived here for almost a year. And besides, this room has been used not more than two-three days ago. Look—you can tell by these quirley butts. They're not dried up at all yet. And the dust on that table. There's the marks that were made by a bottle and some glasses, and they ain't dusted over yet. And look at that plate of beans. Looks like someone was living here and was scared away when you rode up the other day."

"Maybe, maybe"—the Judge faltered—"this is where that White Rider ghost lives."

Ed laughed. "Well, if that ghost eats beans, I don't guess we have to worry about him much."

But the Judge's worries were not quieted.

That did not interfere with his wizardry with a skillet, however, and after they had unpacked and tended to their horses, the Judge proved he had not been guilty of idle boasting when he had called himself a fine cook.

They ate heartily despite the presence of the Kid's body, which they had moved into a side room.

When they had finished, the Judge said, "Look, Ed, I want to show you something," and produced the still full bottle of Mount Vernon.

"Swell," encouraged Brady. He could have done with a drink himself after his hectic day, but he pushed the desire aside so as not to make things harder for the Judge. "Swell. You sure got will power, and I'm proud of you."

The Judge glowed at the praise as might a small schoolboy who had just received a gold star from his teacher.

CHAPTER VIII

THERE was much to be done about the Shooting Star. The house itself needed cleaning up and fixing; the fences needed mending; the wood pile replenishing; and most of all the stock that remained had been running wild and needed to be rounded up, if only for a count.

But Ed Brady felt that until certain questions were cleared up, it would be a waste of time to busy himself with these routine tasks.

Over the breakfast table he and the Judge discussed a course of action. First, they decided they would try to get information. What was Kelton's reason for persecuting them; why had the Morgans been killed, and by whom; where did Susan Wells fit into the picture—and at the thought of her something inside Ed Brady tingled—and just what was her relationship to Al Ruffer?

They decided that the Judge should ride into town to inform Sheriff Toler about the killing of the Kid while Ed rode over to the Diamond O to see if Susan could throw some light on the subject.

The Diamond O ranch house lay at the far end of its pasture land, so it was a five or six mile ride.

Instead of following the trail, he decided to cut across his own land, then through the woods.

Part way through the tree-clothed hillside, he pulled up short, feeling sure he had seen a gray form flit behind a tree ahead of him.

His gun was out, and he called, "Come out of there with your hands up or I shoot."

From the corner of his eye he was figuring on the best way for him to jump, in the event that a bullet should come singing from behind that big tree.

But instead, a bedraggled little figure in a hat which was almost as large as the rest of him put together stepped out, hands high over his head.

"Well, if it ain't a younker," exclaimed Ed, for the lad could be hardly more than ten years old. "Okay, son, drop your hands. But tell me, what're you doing here and who are you?"

"Me Pancho," answered the boy.

Pancho. Ed's mind flew to the sheriff's story of little Pancho, who had informed him of the shooting at the Morgans'.

"Ho, so you're little Pancho. And what are you doing in these parts?"

"Me live over there." The boy pointed vaguely to the west.

"I didn't know anybody lived over that way," said Ed.

"Yes." Pancho shook his head violently. "Me live with Mamma, an' six little brudder an' sister."

"And what're you doing out here?" Ed asked.

"Me work. Look, I show you." Out from behind the tree he brought a basket which was more than half filled with mushrooms. "Me pick mushrooms—take Cochetopa—sell for money."

"Well, well. You're a little young to be working, aren't you? You ought to be in school."

"No, me oldest boy; man in family—since my papa get killed."

Ed drew the story from him. This Mexican family had owned a small piece of land at the other side of the town, but when the father had been the innocent bystander in a shooting fray, they lost their means of support and their land. The mother had received permission from Mr. Wells to use one of the Diamond O's line houses, and she had herded her little brood into its bare one room interior.

When Pancho found that he could sell the mushrooms that grew in the forest, he made a practice of bringing them into town, and received in return enough money to keep the family's bodies and souls together.

THROUGH the whole story ran the boy's glowing praise for Susan Wells and her father for allowing them to use the shack. "Or else we have no roof," was the way the lad put it.

"But what happened to Mr. Wells?" asked Ed.

"They say bad things, but me no believe," little Pancho replied.

"What kind of bad things?"

The boy was reluctant to answer, and Ed felt very self-conscious about pumping him, but his common sense told him that with Susan turning aside questions, the only way to get the information he would need to protect both her and himself was to get the answers wherever he could.

So he insisted and persisted, wheedling the boy along and drawing him out until he had a fairly complete story.

It seemed that about a month before the banker in Cochetopa had been killed by a cold-blooded bullet in the back. There had been no need for the killing, for he had been unarmed. It was a particularly brazen murder.

Old Jeff Wells had had a long-standing feud with the banker over some mortgage transaction and was on bad terms with him. He had been in town at the time of the killing, and some claimed to have seen him coming out of the bank with his gun smoking.

But when a posse went to collect him, he had completely disappeared.

About a week later a story came out of New Mexico that an old man who said his name was Jefferson Wells had been killed in a saloon brawl and had asked that his family in Cochetopa be notified.

The town had been upset by the crudeness and the cold-bloodedness of the killing and, without old Jeff to vent their anger on, had taken it out on Susan.

She had been practically ostracized since that murder, and none of the respectable families invited her to their homes any more.

He threw Pancho a gold piece which made the boy's eyes pop and sent him scurrying home to share his joy with his mother.

BRADY proceeded through the woods and emerged at the end of the Diamond O pasture land. The house was visible in the distance, and he headed straight for it.

Down where he figured the road would be there was a moving cloud of dust that told of another horseman approaching the house.

Their paths converged about a hundred yards from the house, and Ed saw that it was Al Ruffer. He attempted to avoid him, but Ruffer stopped his horse across Ed's tracks and forced him to pull in.

"Oh, it's you again, is it?"

"Yeah," said Ed briefly and quickly. "It's me."

"Where you headin'?" It was the tone of a slave-owner to his slave.

"To the house." Ed remained unperturbed.

"What for?"

"To see Miss Wells."

"What about?"

"Personal business."

"Personal business! Didn't I tell you to keep away from that girl?"

Ed scratched his head as though trying to remember. "Yes," he finally drawled. "I believe you did say something like that. But"—his tone was still meek—"I'm kind of absent-minded, so would you mind repeating it, please, sir?"

Ruffer glared. Was this ranny pulling his leg? He couldn't be sure, so he said in his most bullying tones, "All right, lobo. Now get this and get it good, because I ain't gonna repeat it. You keep away from Miss Wells. No ridin' with her and no talkin' with her except on ranch business, and mighty little of that. You got that?"

"Yes, sir," said Ed. "Is that all to your orders, sir?"

"Yes, that's all, except turn your horse around and get goin' where you came from."

"Thank you, Mr. Ruffer," said Ed. "I just wanted to be sure of what you wanted," he continued in the same mild tone. "But I'm afraid I can't oblige you, because I intend to see Miss Wells just as often as she'll see me!"

"Why, you—" Ruffer began shouting, but Ed cut him off. "Shh, Mr. Ruffer. You've already disturbed the lady. Look, she's coming out to see what all the noise is about."

Susan had indeed been attracted by Ruffer's loud voice and came to the door to see the cause of it.

Instead of calming the angry man, Ed's quiet tone had only served to

anger him further, and he was quivering with rage as he began shouting again.

But once more Ed cut into his tirade with: "Now, no use getting upset in front of the lady, Ruffer, but I promise you that next time we meet alone I'm going to push that ugly nose of yours in. Now I'm going in to see Miss Wells, so I'd suggest that you go for a ride for a few hours and cool off."

He started to pass by Ruffer's horse, but Ruffer was wild and would have none of it.

He swung a blow at Ed, but his anger had the better of his control and the blow went wild. Ed tried to ride away, for he had no desire to get into a fight in Susan's presence, but Ruffer was after him. Seeing there was no way out of it, Ed let go a right hand.

It caught Ruffer on the nose as Ed had promised it would, and the shock and surprise of it were so great that the bully tumbled sideways from his horse. The horse, taking fright, ran off, dragging Ruffer by one stirrup.

Ed watched anxiously, for if Ruffer were not able to extricate his foot from that stirrup Ed knew he would have to chase after the horse to save the bully from being pounded to death.

But his fears were unnecessary, for Ruffer was able to kick free before he had received too much damage. He stood up, hobbled about a bit, testing his legs, then, after throwing a glance of hatred at Ed, painfully made his way in search of his horse.

ED BRADY knew he had made another implacable enemy. He could imagine what the Judge would say about this little venture. But it was too late to do anything about it. He had done all he could to avoid the quarrel.

He shrugged his shoulders and made his way to the house, where Susan, who had witnessed the finale of the affair, was still waiting.

"I'm powerful sorry, Miss Susan, ma'am," he said as soon as he had dismounted. "I tried my best not to get into a fight."

"Why, Ed, he hit you first. I saw it. You have nothing to apologize for. Besides"—and her eyes twinkled—"Al has a way of being pretty provoking at times. Maybe this will do him some good."

She walked over and shook his hand. "And now welcome to the Diamond O. I'm glad you came. Come inside and I'll get you a cool drink after your dusty ride." And she led him indoors.

Brady was overjoyed at her cordiality. And her lack of concern over Ruffer's fate told him more than her words that he had nothing to worry about on that score.

The house was comfortable and cozy as only a woman can make a house, and as Ed sat sipping a long cool drink in those delightful surroundings, with Susan, her lips and cheeks red and her eyes sparkling, sitting opposite him, he was clearly conscious of what he wanted.

He wanted this girl opposite him always.

They spoke of many things, but whenever Ed asked about Kelton or her father, she managed to avoid giving direct answers, and swung the conversation into different channels.

Ed felt self-conscious and shy, and yet he also felt as if he had known this girl all his life, and that all this talk was somehow a repetition of talks he had had with her before at some vague time in some vague place. Yet he knew he had met her only once before in his whole life—yesterday.

He mentioned the fact that he didn't feel as though they were strangers at all, and she reddened a bit more and said, as though making a sacred confession, "I'm glad you said that, Ed, because—well, because I feel the same way about you, and it would have been awful if it had been one-sided, wouldn't it?" Then, before he could answer, she jumped up and grabbed his glass, calling, "Wait here; I'll get you another drink," and ran into the kitchen, leaving him very flustered and very happy.

He was pulled out of his blissful reverie by the sound of hoofs pounding down the road.

"More trouble," he sighed. "Al Ruffer has probably thought up a good answer and is coming to give it to me." And he examined his gun to make sure its cylinder was full.

But as the rider came closer he could see that it was not Ruffer but the squat figure of the Judge. This did not lift his feeling of uneasiness. The Judge must be bearing news to come tearing along this way, and news at this time would probably be bad.

He wasn't far wrong in his assumption. When the Judge had pulled up, he gave his message.

"There's a bunch of men been out to the ranch looking for you, Ed, and Kelton was leading the pack. They got together right after I reported the Kid's killing."

"Vigilantes?" Ed asked.

"No, these hombres looked like respectable citizens. But with Kelton at their head, I wouldn't trust them."

"I wouldn't trust a drove of angels with Kelton leading them," agreed Ed. "Where are they now?"

"I told them I didn't know where you were or when you'd be back, and they rode across the range to look for you."

"Well," Ed sighed, "I guess I might as well find out what they're after."

He found Susan and said goodbye; their handclasp was firm and understanding.

Then he joined the Judge, and they rode down the trail together.

CHAPTER IX

FAR across the range, near the south end where the smooth valley floor had been torn from its regularity untold years before and had been massed into two grassless, granite-sided hills with a narrow aperture between them, known as the canyon, Ed and the Judge saw Kelton and his group of riders massed. There were perhaps a dozen of them.

"Humph," grunted Ed. "Respectable is right. There ain't a ranny among the lot. Every one of them boys is a ranch owner."

"How can you tell?" asked the Judge. "You haven't been here long enough to know them."

"Just one look can tell you. Look at their middles. See the fat? Well, did you ever see a fat cowboy? No sir. They work too hard ever to get fat. They don't put on that middle roll until they get their own ranches and get rich enough to hire the skinny men to do the work for them."

They were close enough now to see the men clearly, and Kelton's face stood out from the others. It was puffed and bleary looking and showed the signs of the terrific beating it had absorbed.

The well padded, prosperously dressed men were riding to meet them. No gunnies here, no riffraff, no vigilantes. These men represented the wealth of the valley. Their main interest was in running their ranches on a profitable basis; the fights and gunplay they usually left to their subordinates. Kelton, although of cruder character, was still one of them, if not the largest landowner in the valley, and he did not seem a misfit with this crew.

They met on the valley floor, and one of the ranchers rode a few steps ahead of the others and spoke. "Are you Ed Brady?" he asked.

"That's me," Ed returned. "And this is my friend, the Cerro Judge."

"I," said the rancher, "am Shep Turner, president of the Cochetopa Ranchers Association, and these men,"—he pointed behind him—"are members of our organization. We've been looking for you."

"So I understand," said Brady. He knew that he would soon be at odds with these men, and he felt a little sorry about it, for most of them, and Turner especially, were not men whom it was easy to dislike. They were the type of men, instead, with whom Ed would have been glad to be friendly. But traveling with Kelton as they were, Ed knew that there could be no friendship between them.

"Brady," said Turner, "I want you to understand there's nothing personal in anything I'm going to say. But our boys had a meeting this morning, and we decided that you were not welcome to our valley."

Ed sat rigid for a moment. "And what am I supposed to do about it?" he asked.

"We are willing to buy your ranch as a group or if you prefer, one of our members is willing to buy it individually and guarantee you a handsome profit on your investment."

"And then what?"

"And then you go back to Cerro or wherever else you may want to go, just so long as it's not in the Cochetopa valley."

"I see," Ed nodded. "That's just what Kelton wanted. Now, Mr. Turner, please tell me, what'll happen if I don't do what you want me to?"

"Well"—Turner was choosing his words carefully—"I'm not threatening you, Brady, but there are certain things we control in these parts. For instance, if you should want to borrow money or discount notes at the bank to hold you over till you sell your beef, you'd have to get the O.K. of the bank's board of directors. The board has six members. Five are also members of the Ranchers' Association.

"The only way to ship beef out of the valley is on the spur railroad, and we had that railroad built and we control it.

"If you want to buy feed for winter, the only feed supply in Cochetopa belongs to one of our members.

"If—"

"That's enough," called Ed. "I understand. You ain't threatening me, but if I don't go peaceful you'll freeze me out. You'd fix it so I couldn't move a head of stock or a pound of feed. Okay. I get the idea."

TURNER nodded, as though surprised at Ed's attitude. He had expected a quick flare-up.

"And now tell me, Mr. Turner, why do you want to get rid of me so bad?"

"Well, Brady, our aim is to keep the valley clean. We've been having some trouble here lately, more than enough, and we just don't want any more."

"And you feel I'd make trouble?"

"Yes, we do. You've only been in town a few days, but we had heard plenty of stories of your shooting affairs in Cerro before you came. Then on your first day here, old Morgan and his wife were killed. I'm not saying you killed them," he added hastily. "Walt Toler is pretty sure you didn't, as a matter of fact—but still it's a nasty coincidence. Then we find that the Kid has been killed out at the Shooting Star."

He shook his head sadly. "It seems like, Brady, you're one of those men that trouble follows around, and we want it to follow you out of the valley."

"Is that all?" asked Ed.

"That's all," said Shep Turner.

The other men had sat quietly on their horses. Only Kelton's face showed a gloating look beneath its puffiness. The others had serious faces, for they could not fail to be impressed by the civil and upstanding appearance and manner of Brady.

"Well, gentlemen," said Ed, addressing the whole group, "I want to thank you for putting it to me in this open and honest way. From my experience with one of your members"—and he looked hard at Kelton—"I was looking for a bullet in the back instead of a face to face talk.

"But," he went on, "I think you got things a little bit twisted. Like Mr. Turner said, you already had trouble in this valley before I came. I didn't bring it. From what I've heard, your banker was killed a little while back, and Mr. Jeff Wells was driven out of the valley and killed too. But that didn't stop the killings, because the Morgans were killed the same way the banker was—and remember, that happened *before* I came here, not after. On top of all that, I understand that practically every ranch owner hereabouts has been losing stock to rustlers regularly. Is that right?"

"Yes," agreed Turner. "We have. And those are the things I meant when I said we had enough trouble already. We want a clear field to find Morgan's killers and root out the rustlers without worrying very much about what trouble you'll be up to."

"But, gentlemen"—Ed continued to

speak in a quiet, unexcited tone — "you forget one thing. I have already been involved in your troubles. Yessir. I've been accused of the Morgan killing, and though I've been cleared in the sheriff's eyes, you gentlemen still bring it up, showing that you're still not sure of my innocence. On top of this, three drygulchers, who I have reason to believe were working for one of your members, were waiting for me in the dark last night. The Kid was one of them. He was killed by the bullets of his pals. So you see, gentlemen, I've got an interest in your troubles, because they have been forced upon me.

"That being the case, you wouldn't want me to pull up stakes until I at least find out who hired those gunnies, would you?"

"I'm sorry, Brady," returned Turner, "but we would. It's to avoid any more killing which would surely follow your activities that we want you to go!"

ED's face changed. Hard muscles around his jaw stood out, and his chin became more square and jutted forward. His voice too seemed different, having an icy quality about it as he said, "All right, boys. I see where you stand. You'd rather protect the murderers and rustlers than have me find out who they are." He held up his hand and silenced them as they began protesting.

"No use quibbling about it. That's exactly what it amounts to. Well, now let me tell you where I stand. I'm staying in Cochetopa valley, and what's more, I'm going to find out what's behind all these killings.

"You think you can freeze me out? Then you don't know Ed Brady. Stop my credit? Yes, you could, but I ain't asked for none yet, and I don't intend to. Prevent me from shipping? I don't aim to do none for the first year. Stop my feed? I won't need none afore winter, and I'll have the answer to this puzzle long before then.

"But, boys," he went on with his caustic voice, "even if I needed credit and feed and cattle cars tomorrow, I still wouldn't leave. No sir! I've taken on a job and I'm going to see it through, and there's no one in this valley can make me quit until I'm satisfied with the answer.

"And if anyone tries to stop me"— and he stared directly at Kelton, who wasn't gloating any more—"I promise that it will go hard with him."

He waited a moment for the words to sink in, then concluded, "Good day, gentlemen," whirled his horse and headed back with the Judge at his side.

"Whew!" said the Judge. "You certainly told them off."

"I tried to make myself clear."

"They got it clear, all right, all right. But will they take it that way? That's the question. Those boys hold a lot of power around here, and Kelton seems to have them working on his side. They're going to make it hard for you, Ed."

"Yeah, I know, Judge. We're in a tough spot. But it's not the first time. We'll pull through it all right. Unless you want to clear out and hit the trail back to Cerro."

"And leave you here to face that mob alone? Ed Brady, I ought to plug you for even suggesting it."

"All right, Judge. Don't get excited. I was only thinking it would be a shame if you got hurt in a fight that ain't no fight of yours."

"A fight of yours is a fight of mine and I'm not running out on it," averred the older man, "even if there are ghosts running around loose."

"Don't worry about the ghosts," Ed laughed. "I'll protect you from them. It's the bullets you'll have to watch out for."

CHAPTER X

ED BRADY and the Judge proceeded to put in a week of such intensive work that every night at dark they fell exhausted into their bunks, but the effects of the work were plainly visible: the Shooting Star took on a changed appearance.

A coat of white paint over its exterior made its sides glisten in the sunlight, and new colored shingles on its roof made it bright and cheery.

Every room inside was scrubbed from top to bottom with strong soap and water and plenty of elbow grease, until even the floors sparkled.

The dirt and dust of a year was scraped and washed, and the Judge showed an unexpected talent in tossing together some material he found in the attic and making it into attractive curtains.

Two full days were spent cutting and trimming fence posts, then another three or four in digging new holes for them and mending the fences.

The corral also required mending, and new wire seemed to be needed everywhere.

At the beginning of the second week they built pens to hold the calves, then decided that they must round up whatever stock there was on the ranch so that they might at least count heads and know where they stood.

Since it had been neglected for that long, it was possible that they would find a large number of unbranded yearlings; on the other hand, as the Judge remarked, "With varmints like Kelton about and rustlers running loose in the valley, I'll be surprised if we find any more cattle than they overlooked. Those hombres ain't the kind to let stock graze on an unprotected ranch."

Nevertheless they agreed to find out, and set off into the hills, where the stock, if any had been left, would be grazing.

"Even if we don't find more'n a handful I won't feel bad," said Ed as they rode. "When I bought the place, the old man warned me that it might be cleaned before I got here. I just paid for the land and the house. Any stock will be like finding money."

They had reached the hillside and were beginning to climb when they turned to look at the ranch, and Ed's heart pounded a little at the beauty of it. He shook his head a little and said, "She sure is a pretty sight."

"I never did see a prettier layout," agreed the Judge. "Nestling down there in a green bowl with purple sides, sparkling and shining in the sunshine, and that big bright blue sky hanging over her; yes, boy, she's a beautiful sight."

"And she's mine," said Ed determinedly, as though he had just remembered that there were some who would deprive him of the right of ownership of this peaceful bit of land. "She's mine and I'll fight for her."

The Judge nodded. "I'm with you on that, Ed. And she's well worth fighting for, too."

THEY laid their plans for the roundup. It would be difficult and lone too complete, with only the two of them working at it, for it was still midsummer, and the cattle, if there were any, would resist the attempt to be driven down the hills. In the fall they would wander down of their own accord, but in hot summer days the hills were much more to their liking.

Therefore they planned to take separate paths and ride as far up as the Shooting Star line went, then beat their way down, covering only a limited amount of territory each time, but clearing it as thoroughly as possible. At the bottom, they would pen whatever stock they had driven before them in the newly built pens and then begin again.

After a count, they would release the two years olds and hold the calves and yearlings for branding, which would be the next step on their program.

They proceeded as they had planned, beating the land between them, and were amazed, a few hours later, upon reaching their valley floor, to find that they had bagged more than thirty head in their first operation.

"Phew," whistled Ed. "That's more than I expected to find altogether. Judge, it looks like the rustlers have neglected the Shooting Star!"

"Maybe they figured there was no need to rush it, with the place open for them at any time," the Judge suggested.

"Either that, or—" Ed hesitated.

"Or what?" his partner asked.

"Oh, nothing. Just some wild guessing. Time'll tell if it's right.

But now let's go and see how many more we can round up."

For four days in a row they continued combing the hills. Not all of their tries were as productive as the first had been, but each brought in something.

At the end of four days they decided that though there was doubtless more stock in the hills, the number must be inconsequential. They made their count, and found a total of five hundred and forty head, including the spring born calves! Five hundred and forty head, when Ed had expected between twenty and thirty at the outside!

"'Tain't only a beautiful spread now, Ed," said the Judge. "It's a well stocked one, too. With all that stock, you'll have to be hiring help to care for them, come cooler weather."

Ed was a little dazed by his unexpected good fortune.

"Gosh, Judge," he said, "I can hardly believe it. The stock alone is worth far more than I paid for the whole layout. I'll be able to pay off the notes by just selling the two year olds!"

"If they let you ship 'em," reminded the Judge.

Ed Brady nodded, remembering the threat that hung over his head.

"I've been thinking, Judge," he said, "about what you said t'other day. If the reason the rustlers didn't disturb the Shooting Star cattle was really that they figured they were here for the taking any time, that might explain why they were so anxious for me to sell out or get out."

"Uh huh," the Judge agreed. "That fits in."

"But if that's true," Ed went on, "then the finger points straight at Kelton."

"No question about that in my mind."

"Gosh, if I only had some way of proving it."

"We'll have to find a way pretty soon," the Judge reminded him. "Things have been too quiet 'round here for the last two weeks. I got a feeling in my bones that something's going to break. And unless we can prove what we suspicion, we'll get the dirty end of the break."

"Well, we got things pretty well set here at the ranch now," said Ed. "So we can sit down and plan our next moves in the morning. Seems to me like the first thing we'll have to do is to ride into town to see what's been going on during the last two weeks. Maybe there's been a few more killings."

"Don't you believe it," replied the Judge. "Things have been quiet hereabouts."

"How do you know?"

"Because if there had been any trouble, they'd have rid out after us, first crack out of the box," answered the older man decisively.

"Guess you're right, at that," Ed agreed. "Well, we can figger our plans in the morning. I'm going to get some sleep now."

THEY had been asleep hardly an hour when the sound of a horseman galloping across the range had them both out of bed and on their feet.

Ed Brady rushed to the window, rifle in hand, to be ready for any eventuality, but the rider's intentions were peaceful, as his words showed.

"There's rustlers driving a herd down by the canyon," he shouted, and did not even stop, but rode on, apparently to warn the other ranchmen.

Ed had his levis and boots on and the Judge was almost completely dressed, too, when a sudden suspicion crossed Brady's mind.

He stopped for a second, then said hastily, "Look, Judge, this may be just what we were expecting. Maybe this is just a way of getting us out of the house for a while. I wouldn't put it beyond them to try to burn us out while we were gone."

"Cripes, yes," agreed the Judge. "That would be just Kelton's style. What'll we do about it?"

"I'll go down to the canyon and see what I find," replied Ed. "You stay here and keep a gun handy until I get back."

"Right," said the Judge, and before there was time for further talk,

Brady was at the corral, saddling his horse.

He urged the animal into wakefulness, and the green carpet of the valley floor began to fly beneath its feet.

"Maybe," he thought as he rode, "this is the real thing. Leastways I'm gonna act like it is until I find out different."

A cheerful prospect seemed to open up before him, for the fact that he had been called on to be a part of a rustling posse showed that he had been accepted by the other ranchers.

And if they worked together and were able to catch the rustlers — well, Ed Brady was pretty sure that when the rustlers were caught they would be pretty close to the killers, too.

The moon had not yet risen, but the sky was so full of stars that they seemed to be pushing each other out of the way. They gave a cool, dim light which made the forms of things discernible without throwing them into bold relief.

Ed coud see the sharp rising canyon walls and its center cleft in the distance, and the night breeze brought the lowing of a herd to his ears.

He slowed down from his headlong gallop to a trot and looked and listened carefully.

"No use riding kerplunk into the middle of them," he thought. "I better wait for the other boys to come so that we can surround them. If I rush in, they may run off, and then we still won't know who they are."

He advanced very slowly until the herd was clearly visible. The cattle were bunched near the canyon mouth and seemed to be browsing.

Ed could not make out anyone who seemed to be driving them. He watched for a while, and then he was sure.

"That stock is alone!" he thought. "There ain't anyone with it."

His earlier suspicion flashed into his mind again. "It may not be rustled stock at all," he thought. "It may be part of my own herd that someone bunched down here, just to get me away from the house."

He thought deeply for a moment, then decided. "I'm going to take a look at that herd."

He pushed his horse forward and soon was in the midst of it, bending over and examining brands.

He was right about there being no one with the cattle, but it was a bad guess that this might be part of his own stock. For as he examined them he realized that, though a few of his own steers were present, practically every other brand in the valley was also represented.

In the distance he could make out the rapid tattoo of horses' hoofs, beating in from several directions at once.

"Well," he thought, "at least it wasn't just a trick to get me away from the house. Whoever it was roused us out, has called the others, too."

HE RODE out to meet the coming riders and, lifting his hat, was about to give a loud hallo, to direct them to the spot, when his hat jerked in his hand. While he was still looking at it in surprise, the delayed crack of a Winchester reached his ears. The hat showed a bullet hole clean through the brim.

For a second he was puzzled; then realization came to him. "They see me here with the beef, so naturally they think I'm one of the rustlers. Maybe I better get out of bullet range until they've calmed down some."

He headed for the canyon mouth, where the rocks and shadows would conceal him, but just as he reached it, he pulled his horse around and, instead of going into the canyon, began to skirt it rapidly.

For another thought had hit him: the full realization of what he had fallen into. "What a fool I am," he thought. "I should have known as soon as I found the herd alone. It ain't by accident that I was mistook for a rustler. That's what the whole plan is. By getting me down here first, the others find me alone with the beef and try to hang the rustling on me. And before I can prove anything, they string me up. Kelton's been at work once again."

Still in the shadows, he was able to see the two other riders converge near the canyon mouth and wait.

Ed nodded. "Yep," he told his horse. "The idea would be to catch me skulking in the canyon. If I had gone in there my goose would be cooked, for I'd have no choice but to run when they started shooting, and that would make me look as guilty as hell. It was a good frameup, all right, and I almost walked right into it."

He was still close enough to the rocks to remain unseen, but had increased his distance from the herd and the ranchers. Looking back, he could distinguish about five figures, now waiting.

"Guess it's about time for me to put in my appearance," he thought. "'Twould look mighty suspicious if I didn't show up at all."

He had reached the section where the hillside which formed the side of the canyon wall dwindled into the flat plain, so he edged his horse out into the open and gave him his head.

In a few moments he had pulled up in the midst of the waiting ranchers. He recognized old Shep Turner and also Lew Kelton. Several of the other Association men made up the posse.

"What luck?" Brady called as he rode in.

"They got away," Turner answered disgustedly. 'But at least we got our beef back."

"How is it," gritted Kelton, "that you come riding in from the west trail when your ranch is straight down the valley?"

"Oh," Ed explained nonchalantly, "I didn't want to ride straight into a mess of rustlers, so I decided to cross-cut, and come in from the side. No use making an open target of myself, is there, Kelton?"

Kelton muttered something indistinguishable and withdrew.

"What do we do now?" asked Ed.

Turner scratched his head in perplexity. "I dunno. Seems to me as if the rustlers would be fools to hang around, but just before you rode up, Kelton was pushing for us to scour the canyon. Said he was sure we'd find something there."

"Well, why not?" asked Ed, grinning. "We might find some signs. But what made Kelton so sure?"

"He claims there was someone here when he rode up who headed for the canyon mouth when he fired."

"Oho," said Ed, looking hard at Kelton, who seemed to shrivel at the look. "I thought I heard a shot. So it was Kelton who fired it?"

"Yes," said Turner, "and he was hoping he might have clipped the rustler. If he did, there's a chance we might find him in the canyon."

"So Kelton was the first one here, huh?" Ed asked.

"Yep," agreed Turner.

"Sure he wasn't with the beef all the while?"

TURNER was about to answer when Kelton came up, snarling. Hatred distorted his face which, though almost healed, still showed signs of his run-in with Ed.

"What're you trying to do, Brady?" he demanded. "Make me out to be one of the rustlers?"

"Oh, I dunno," Ed replied calmly. "I'm just asking questions. If you boys had rid up and found me with the beef, you'd be mighty suspicious about it, wouldn't you?"

"That's different."

"Oh, not so different. Why doesn't the same thing fit you?"

"Would I warn the others if I was rustling the beef myself?" snarled Kelton, now on the defensive.

"Oh, so it was you who gave the warning!" Ed's smile became wider. "That fits in all around."

Turner was looking on, perplexed. "What's all this about?" he asked.

"Nothing at all," replied Ed airily. "Just checking on some suspicions, that's all."

He would have liked to have exposed Kelton's trick then and there, but that would have required him to admit that he had been alone with the stock when Kelton rode up and fired. Kelton would have liked that, he knew, for then the big rancher would have been able to point out that having ridden away and returned when

the others were present was cause for suspicion.

Ed decided to say nothing more of the incident, but he racked it up carefully in his memory. Another score to settle with Lew Kelton when the proper time arrived. He switched the subject back to the canyon.

"How about trying to find the trail of the rustler who went through?" he asked.

But Kelton, who had been so anxious for the search when he had expected to find Ed Brady inside the canyon, now opposed it.

"It's too late now," he said gruffly. "Whoever it was has had time to ride to Mexico while you stood here jawing."

"Not if you winged him," insisted Ed. "A man can't ride far with a bullet in him."

Kelton continued to argue against it, but the harder he argued the more persistent Ed became.

Finally Shep Turner came into the discussion on Ed's side.

"Don't see what we got to lose by looking, Lew," he said. "So long as we're out here, we may as well be as thorough as we can."

Kelton, seeing he would be outvoted, gave in, but not gracefully. "It ain't becoming," he muttered, "to see you being led around by the nose by a killer like Brady."

Turner's voice was sharp as he answered, "Nobody ain't leading me by the nose or by anything else, Lew! We're looking for the trail of the rustlers, and not having personal arguments about it. Come on!" And he headed for the canyon mouth, the group following at his heels.

ED BRADY grinned with satisfaction. Turner's manner and action showed that, though he and his association might be working hand in hand with Kelton, it was not because the big rancher dominated them completely. The thought cheered Ed. It meant that if he could prove his suspicions of Kelton, Turner and his crowd would join forces with him, instead of becoming his enemy's ally.

Inside the cleft in the rock, the walls rose precipitously. The stars winked down coldly. Ed had the feeling that this was how things would look and feel if he were at the bottom of a deep well.

The horses picked their way carefully, for the narrow path was filled with rocks which could easily cause a serious fall.

About a hundred yards in, the trail curved sharply at right angles and seemed to head into the bowels of the mountains.

"Look," called Turner in amazement, "it's widened out into a broad green valley floor!"

He was right.

No longer were the sides sheer granite closing in, but instead they broadened out and seemed grass-covered. The rocks were gone from underfoot, and a green carpet had taken their place.

Ed jumped from his horse and got down on his hands and knees to examine the ground. "There's been plenty of beef run through here, all right," he announced, standing up after his examination. "And the last lot went through not too long ago. You can still see their marks."

Exclamations of surprise came from all the riders, for this solved the problem of their disappearing cattle.

Although their herds had been steadily diminishing, no one had been able to figure how the stock had been removed from the valley. They had known of the canyon, of course, but to them it had always seemed a rocky cleft through which it would be impossible to drive stock. Now they found that that only applied to its entrance. Once around the turn, that rocky, forbidding canyon turned into a soft, inviting valley.

"This is on your land, Brady," Kelton's voice cracked sharply in the night. "Do you mean to tell us you didn't know about it?"

"Nary an inkling," answered Ed. "But it seems to me that you boys who've been living in the valley so long might have known about it." Once again he was speaking not to the group, but directly to Kelton.

"No." Turner's reply saved Kelton from having to lie again. "We always

thought of this section as dry, rocky badlands."

"I did, too, up till now," said Ed. "But this has sure undeceived me. If the darkness ain't fooling my eyes, I got miles and miles of good summer grazing grounds that I never knew I owned. And if Mr. Kelton"—and he grinned at the big rancher—"hadn't brought us down here tonight and suggested looking for the rustler, I still wouldn't know about it. I think I owe a vote of thanks to Mr. Kelton."

KELTON was squirming in his saddle and cursing himself and Ed Brady and the world in general, under his breath, for he knew that Brady's words were the truth.

He, Kelton, and he alone was really responsible for this disclosure.

"I," he said coldly, "am going to ride ahead and see where this leads to." And he started down the valley.

"Wait up," cried Ed. "I'm with you!" He vaulted back into his saddle and was off after Kelton.

"I don't hanker for his company none," he whispered to his horse, "but I just don't trust that hombre off by himself. Let him alone for ten minutes and he'll be planning some new devilment."

"Hi—" Turner called after them. "We'll be at the mouth of the canyon, separating the different brands. Come back soon and pick out yours."

Turner and the rest of the posse wheeled and made their way around the horseshoe bend whence they had come, while Kelton thundered down the fertile valley with Ed Brady at his heels.

The ranchman seemed to be thinking deeply, and when Ed caught up with him, he reined in his horse and sat looking at the younger man.

Brady sat waiting expectantly. He was ready for whatever might come, be it a fight with fists or guns, or even an argument. He was surprised when Kelton spoke in a gentle voice which was meant to be persuasive.

"Look here, Brady. I've got a proposition for you!"

"Let's have it," said Ed guardedly.

"We've been fighting since you got here," Kelton went on.

"Not we," Ed cut in. "You. I've just been trying to protect myself. I haven't started to fight yet."

"All right," Kelton waved an impatient hand. "*I've* been fighting since you got here, if you prefer it that way. Well, suppose I admit I was wrong?"

Ed looked at him in surprise.

"I don't understand what you mean," he said.

"A man can make a mistake, can't he?" demanded Kelton. "Suppose I was against you from the start because of stories I heard about you before you came. I could change my mind, couldn't I?"

"Yeah," Ed drawled. "You could—but did you?"

"I ain't saying I did—completely But I am saying that where before I didn't believe there was room for both of us in the same valley, now I think there's room aplenty."

"You mean you want to call off the fight?" asked Brady.

"That's right," replied Kelton heartily. "And more than that, I want to be a good neighbor to you."

Ed whistled thoughtfully.

"Yes," Kelton went on. "You can do yourself good by being friendly. I'll get you into the Association, and between us, we can have a good thing here."

"Kind of partners, like, you mean?" Ed queried.

"Yeah, kind of," Kelton agreed.

ED GRINNED. "There's an old saying that if you can't whip a man, the next best thing is to join him. That how you're figgering?"

Kelton smiled ruefully. "It don't sound so pretty, the way you put it, but that's the general idea. What do you say?"

"Well, I'll tell you, Kelton," Ed replied deliberately. "I'm willing to have peace between us. I don't think I'd want to be any kind of partner to you, but I am willing to be a good neighbor. But"—and here his voice became cold and sharp—"there's a few things I must find out first."

"What things?" asked Kelton.

"First — who has been doing the rustling in the valley?"

He paused as though expecting Kelton to supply the answer. When there was none forthcoming, he went on, "Second—who sent those drygulchers out to the Shooting Star to plug me?"

Again a pause—again no answer.

"Third—who killed the Morgans?"

Kelton said nothing.

The two men sat staring at each other, understanding each other perfectly. Then Ed went on, "I'm gonna get the answers to those three questions, Kelton. And I'll be glad to be a good neighbor to you after I get them—*if the answers don't get you strung up on the nearest tree!*"

Kelton wheeled his horse. "All right, Brady," he said. "You're asking for war. And when it comes, remember, you asked for it!"

He dug his spurs sharply into his animal and rode to join the posse, leaving Ed alone.

Ed Brady shook his head. "If I wasn't sure before, I would be now," he said, speaking softly into the night. "Only the guilty man wouldn't want those questions answered."

He cantered back to the opening of the canyon to help in separating the stock, but while he worked, he kept an eye on Kelton; he would not have put it above that worthy to allow his gun to go off "accidentally."

But Kelton kept to his own business, dividing his cattle from the herd.

Ed found about a dozen head with the Shooting Star brand on them. When the others had also isolated their brands into separate groups, they began their homeward trek, driving their cattle before them.

As he neared the ranch, Ed thought, "The Judge and me ought to ride through the canyon, come daybreak, and see just what's in there, and where it leads to."

He pushed the cattle on, down near the main herd, and left them to drift for themselves.

INSIDE the house, the Judge was waiting impatiently.

He heaved a sigh of relief when Ed entered, saying, "After you left, I felt sure the whole thing was a trap."

Ed nodded. "It was meant to be," he agreed, then went on to tell the whole story.

"It was supposed to trap me," he finished, "but instead Kelton got caught in his own net. He was so sure that I was hiding right in the mouth of that canyon that he got brash about it, and showed himself up."

The Judge looked at Ed somberly for a moment, then said, "You know, Ed, if we don't pin that hombre down mighty soon, he's going to get you one way or t'other."

Ed nodded his understanding and agreement.

"That being the case," the Judge went on, "wouldn't it be plain self-defense if you took the law into your own hands and finished him off before he got the chance to do it to you?"

"No," said Ed shortly. "That would be cold-blooded killing."

"But in Cerro—" the Judge protested.

"In Cerro," Ed cut in, "every one of those jaspers drew first. I've never thrown a gun on any man without him drawing first, and I ain't gonna let Kelton spoil my record. I don't use a gun to hunt men with. I use it for defense."

The Judge shrugged his shoulders hopelessly.

"It's your funeral," he said. "But as for me, when I see signs of a mountain lion about my stock, I don't wait until he gets to the calves before shooting him. Knowing the nature of the beast, I can't go far wrong by figgering he's getting ready for a kill. By getting him first, I save the calf."

"I know," Ed admitted. "And I ain't saying you're wrong. It's just that I ain't built that way." Then, to change the subject, he asked, "Anything happen here while I was gone?"

"Nothing," answered the fat little Judge, "excepting that Al Ruffer rode by. I thought first he was com-

ing in, but he didn't. He rode right by."

"Just as well he did," said Ed. "He's another lobo we'll have to settle with in our own good time."

IN THE new morning's sunlight, the canyon was even more of a surprise.

The broad green spread extended for about two or three miles before it again narrowed down into a rocky gorge. This gorge, though narrow, was wide enough to pass cattle through in single file.

The two men proceeded through it cautiously, for once in it there was no retreat, and the thought had entered Ed Brady's mind that a boulder, pushed down from above, would do a good job of crushing any horse and rider caught below.

They kept a sharp eye on the canyon rear, but saw no sign of anyone who should not have been there.

Ed grinned. "Bet if Kelton knew we were in here now, he wouldn't let a chance like that go awasting."

The narrow trail wound round and round and at last came out through a break in what seemed to be a sheer cliff.

The two men rode further in an attempt to find out just where they were. In the distance they saw some smoke and made for it.

As they drew closer, they could make out the dim outlines of many buildings.

"It's a town," said Ed, "and a fair good-sized one at that."

This was confirmed as they drew closer.

A man was lounging outside a store, and they reined in their horses.

"What town is this, stranger?" asked Ed.

"Bighorn," was the reply.

"Ain't this where the railroad junction is?" asked Ed.

"Right," said the stranger. "This is where most of the beef from this state is shipped from."

"How far is it to the town of Cochetopa?" Ed wanted to know.

"Well"—the stranger took his weight from the hitching rail he had been leaning on and pointed with his hands—"them hills over there are the rear end of the Cochetopa mountains. The Cochetopa valley is on the other side of them, and the town's about mid-way up the valley. 'Tain't more'n eight or ten miles as the crow flies, but we can't fly over the mountains, so we have to go around them. You circle down around yonder hill" —he indicated with his pointing finger—"and you'll hit a narrow trail that winds its way through. About twenty miles in you'll come to a little spur railroad. That'll lead you right into the valley."

"Thanks, stranger," said Ed. "How long should it take?"

"Oh, you won't make it today," the stranger replied. "You'll have to make camp about mid-day, but you'll get there tomorrow noon with fast riding."

They thanked him again and rode off. Once alone, the Judge's excitement bubbled over.

"Do you realize what this means, Ed?" he cried. "That canyon would save the whole valley a two-day trip to Bighorn. It cuts right through the mountain!"

Ed nodded. "It'll cut the cost of shipping beef in half," he said. "As soon as we settle up our score, we'll smooth out the rocky bottom so all the ranchers can use it."

"You mean," asked the Judge in amazement, "you'd throw it open to them coyotes after the way they treated you?"

"Shore," Ed replied. "I ain't got nothing against them. They acted like they did because they think I'm a gun-shooting, murdering lobo. As soon as they find out their error, they'll change their tune."

THEY MADE their way back to the narrow opening in the hills and retraced their steps.

"What," said Ed, pointing, "do you suppose that could be?"

The Judge followed the direction of Ed's finger and saw an out-jutting ledge, far up on the canyon wall.

"Looks like an outcropping of the rock," he replied. He squinted. "And there seems to be something up there —something shiny."

"Yep, that's what I thought," said Ed, dropping from his saddle. "I'm going to find out what it is."

He looked about carefully, choosing the most likely place for the ascent. None seemed easy, for the wall was almost sheer in places. He finally made his decision and began. For the first hundred feet or so he found footholds and handgrips, but then he reached that part of the canyon side which from below had looked as sheer and smooth as polished glass.

Ed was gratified to find that there were small veins running crosswise through this surface which he would be able to use as the rungs of a ladder.

To the Judge down below, it seemed as though Brady were walking up that smooth surface as a fly walks up a mirror, and he rubbed his eyes in disbelief.

Carefully and surely Ed continued his climb until he had reached the level of the outcropping. Here he found himself on a narrow ledge which led as surely as a path to that wider, larger ledge which was what had attracted his attention from below.

Reaching his goal, he looked about him. The height gave him a clear view, down to the entrance of the canyon. Behind him was the opening of what seemed to be a cave.

With one hand on his gun, he made his way carefully in, and waited until his eyes became accustomed to the dimmer light.

On the floor were several bankets; and a tree trunk, cut into stumpy lengths, had provided four seats. Except for these, the cave was empty.

Ed returned to the ledge and looked about for the shiny substance that had caught his eye. A small bit of metal lay near the edge, catching the sun's rays and throwing them off again. It was this tiny piece of tin which had exposed the almost perfect hideout.

Carefully Ed made his way down the cliff side to where the Judge awaited him with popping eyes.

"I knew," exclaimed the fat little man, "that you could do lots of things, Ed Brady, but I never suspected that you could crawl like a fly!"

Ed laughed and explained about the veins that acted as a ladder. "That's what makes it a perfect hideout," he added. "Nobody from down here would ever suspect that it could be reached, yet when you start up, it's really very easy."

RETURNING through the broad grassy portion of the divide, they saw that cattle were grazing on its slopes.

They took time out to ride up the hillside to investigate and discovered that they were steers of varied brands.

"It'll take a few days for us to run these out and get them returned to their proper owners," Ed remarked.

"Why not invite the other ranchers over to clean out their own stock?" inquired the Judge.

"Good idea," replied Ed. "Suppose you do that when we get back."

"Sure thing," answered his roly-poly companion. "But what are you planning on for this afternoon?"

"I"—Ed had a determined look in his eye—"am planning on taking a ride over to the Diamond O."

The Judge smiled.

"Having seen Susan Wells, I can't say that I blame you."

"Oh, it's not a social visit," said Ed hastily.

"Of course not," agreed the Judge, his eyes twinkling. "It's purely business. And you'll get no pleasure whatsoever from it."

Ed Brady's face was a bit red. "I don't say I won't enjoy talking to Susan—Miss Wells," he replied. "But the reason I want to talk to her is to find out what she knows about Kelton. From what I can see and hear, she's been fighting him longer than we have. That means that in our fight with Kelton, she's on our side. And when you're in a fight like this, you have to use all the allies you can."

"Specially when they got eyes and hair like Susan Wells," added the Judge playfully.

"Now, looky here, Judge—" Ed began, but the Judge cut him off with a laugh. "Don't get het up about it, son," he advised. "I'm only teasing. And there ain't nothing wrong in liking a fine gal like Susan. If I was you, I'd be proud of it instead of getting all red in the face and denying it. She's one gal in a million. So you go and do your business out there and I'll attend to this end."

Ed was silent a moment, as though thinking; then he asked, "Did you notice, Judge, how she sits on her horse—like she was part of it!"

"Oh, my gosh," groaned the Judge. "First he denies any interest in the gal, and now I'm agonna have to listen to all her fine points. Don't waste your time telling me how wonderful she is, son. Tell it to her. She'll appreciate it."

THEIR good humor was quickly dissipated when, on approaching the canyon mouth, they saw a horseman stationed there.

"Looks like Ruffer," said the Judge. Then, in a warning tone, he added, "Probably looking for trouble. Don't let him get the drop on you."

"Not he," said Ed scornfully. "Not when he's outnumbered two to one. He hasn't got that kind of guts. He's only brash when he thinks he has the upper hand."

Ruffer, for the Judge's vision had not erred and it was he, rode to meet them. There was a sly look on his face.

Brady did not wait for Ruffer to speak. He had decided that with people of this type the best method of defense was offense.

He rode over to the intruder and demanded sharply, "What are you doing on my land?"

The big rawboned bully's face dropped at this unexpected approach. "Your land?" he repeated.

"Yes, my land," replied Ed, still hard-voiced. "Didn't you know this canyon was on my land? Or maybe you've been using it so much you got to thinking of it as your own?"

Ruffer's mouth was opening and closing like a fish's, but no sounds came out.

"Well, out with it!" Ed demanded. "What are you doing here, and what do you want?"

With an obvious effort, Ruffer got control of himself.

"I came to do you a favor," he said, expecting to be asked what favor.

But again Ed Brady surprised him by answering, "I don't want any, thanks. Good-bye."

He waited for his unwelcome visitor to leave, but Ruffer made no move to do so.

"You ain't in a position to refuse this favor," he insisted.

"Get rolling, Ruffer," was the only answer he received.

In desperation he blurted, "I know you was with that rustled herd last night. I'm offering to keep the information to myself."

For the first time Ed evinced interest. "Who else knows?" he asked, trying to look guilty.

"Nobody but me—yet," replied Ruffer.

"How did you find out about it?" asked Ed, as though all the starch and fight had gone out of him.

As he became meeker, Ruffer became bolder.

"Because I saw you," he said.

"And you won't tell?" asked Ed anxiously.

"Not if you do what I ask."

"And what do you want me to do?"

The Judge had to turn around to hide a grin at Ed's acting. On the surface he appeared thoroughly frightened, but the Judge knew he was merely attempting to draw Ruffer out in order to find out what was behind his actions.

The sly, bullying look had reappeared on Ruffer's face, and his voice took on its old bulldozing quality as he answered, "You've got to clear out of the Cochetopa hills."

"How soon?" Ed's voice was humble.

"Pronto!"

"What if I don't?"

"Then I'll tell the ranchers what I know and you'll go out anyway—at the end of their guns—if they don't

string you up first."

Ruffer now spoke like a man who held the winning cards in his hand and knew it.

Ed's next words took some of the smugness off his face and out of his voice.

"Get down off your horse," said Brady.

"What for?"

"Because"—and no one would have recognized in this hard, flinty voice the humble tones of a moment before—"I'm going to give you the worst beating you ever got in your life."

All Ruffer's braggadocio was gone.

"I—I—I don't understand," he stuttered.

"All right, I'll explain," said Ed.

"First—you're lying. You didn't see me at the canyon last night because you weren't there. The Judge saw you riding by my ranch house from the other direction.

"Second—if you were there when I got there, then you must have been there with that herd yourself.

"But that ain't why I'm agonna knock your ears off. I'm just tired of being bullied and threatened, and it's time to put a stop to it. Now get down, and we'll see how tough you are, Mr Al Ruffer."

THE BULLY'S face had drained white and his teeth seemed to be chattering as he answered, "It ain't fair. There's two of you against me."

"Pshaw," said Ed. "This is gonna be a fair fight. The Judge won't have no part of it. He can hold our guns, that's all. Come on, hop down."

And suiting the action to the word, Ed jumped from his own animal and began to undo his gun belt.

The bully thought quickly. He could spur his horse and probably make a getaway, but if he did, he must forever keep running from Brady. And if the story ever got out that he had run away from a fair fight, life would be impossible for him in the valley.

Yet he had no desire to match blows with the long, lean cowboy. He had had one experience with Ed's fists which he still remembered, and he had seen what had happened to Kelton.

There was only one way out. He must kill both Brady and the Judge so that he need not fight, nor suffer the consequences of his cowardice.

Quickly he made his decision. He got down from his horse on the far side, and as he stepped out from behind the animal, his gun was out and ready. Two bullets would do the trick quickly. If his part in the killing were ever discovered, and he hoped it would never be, he could claim self-defense. After all, there were two of them against him. He must be sure to take their guns out of their holsters and put them in their hands before he left their dead bodies. Then it would look as if they had drawn first. All these thoughts flashed through Ruffer's mind as he took the two steps from behind his horse.

Then his mouth dropped open and his knees wobbled a little, for facing him were Ed and the Judge, and both of them had their Colts pointing at his middle.

"I figgered you'd pull a gun, Ruffer," came Ed's cool voice. "Drop it!"

The command snapped out like a bullwhip, and the gun dropped from the bully's nerveless fingers.

"Don't shoot," he whimpered. "I didn't mean nothing by it."

"Don't worry," replied Brady in disgust. "We wasn't aiming to use your methods. Get his gun, Judge."

The little man retrieved Ruffer's hogleg from where it had fallen.

"And here's mine," said Ed, handing it to him, belt and all. "And now, Ruffer, come on and fight."

Ruffer seemed paralyzed with fear. He put up his fists automatically as Ed circled around him, but he had no heart in it.

Ed feinted with his left, intending to draw down Ruffer's guard and let go with his right, but before he had finished his move, the bully took a hasty step backward and, tripping on his spurs, went down in a heap.

Ed stood aside, waiting for him to

arise, but Ruffer remained on the ground, cowering in fear.

"Get up!" Ed demanded. "Get up and fight."

But Ruffer made no move to do so.

THE JUDGE'S voice was scornful. "Well, by the good lord Harry!" he ejaculated. "If that ain't the vilest spectacle I ever did see. He's worse to look at than the ugliest horned toad. And I made the mistake of thinking he was a man."

"Give me my gun belt," said Ed. And as he restrapped it about his waist, he added, his tone filled with disgust, "I reckon I would feel right sinful if I hit a man as scared as he is. It would be like smacking a helpless baby. Come on, Judge, let's get out of here before the sight of him makes me sick."

"Right you are," the Judge agreed. "I feel my stummick turning already."

They mounted and looked down at Ruffer, who was still groveling on the ground. In his terror he calculated on all men acting as he would himself act under like circumstances. If the situation were reversed, he knew that he would use a bullet to put an end to his helpless enemy, so as he squirmed he expected that at any moment there would come the crash of a gun that would wipe out his life. The thought only added to his terror.

He was slobbering as he whined, "Don't shoot, Brady. Don't shoot."

With revulsion in his eyes, Ed answered, "Don't worry about it, you yaller polecat. I won't shoot. But I'm taking your gun out a ways to make sure that you don't. Our backs would make a swell target for you. And in the future keep off of my land."

CHAPTER XI

AT THE Diamond O, Brady was disappointed to find no one but the old Indian cook, Wauhela, puttering about the kitchen.

Wauhela seemed ageless. Her face was so full of wrinkles that it seemed formless. She had been the cook at the Diamond O since Susan had been born, and was accepted as a member of the family.

"Come sit," she invited Ed after he told her what he wanted. "Miss Susie be back soon."

She brought him a tall cool drink and, while he was sipping it, asked unexpectedly, "You like Miss Susie?"

"Why, yes," Ed answered, a little embarrassed by the suddenness of the question. "I like her fine."

"Good." The old lady nodded her head in approval. "She fine girl. But I afraid for her."

"Why?" asked Ed, immediately anxious. "Is something the matter?"

"No man in house—bad thing," replied Wauhela tersely. "Miss Susie need man take care for her."

Ed nodded. "It must be pretty tough for a girl to run the whole ranch herself, especially when she's got bad hombres like Kelton and Ruffer to deal with."

"Kelton want her to go away," replied the squaw. "Ruffer want her to marry him. Both bad."

"I calculate you got them both pegged pretty good," agreed Ed. "But have they been making any trouble lately?"

A clatter of hoofs outside interrupted her answer, and through the window they could see Susan dismounting.

"You take care of her," said Wauhela, and soundlessly stepped out of the room.

A moment later Susan danced in, her hair ruffled and her eyes and cheeks glowing from her ride.

When she saw Ed, she stopped dead still for a second, her ripe lips half opened; then she ran over and gripped his hand.

"Welcome," she cried. "I was beginning to think you had forgotten all about us."

"Oh, no, ma'am," denied Ed vigorously. "No such thing. I didn't forget you for a minute. That is—I mean—it's just that I've been awful busy getting the Shooting Star in shape."

"I understand," she said, and her eyes were twinkling. "Business before pleasure."

"Well, ma'am—"

"I thought we had agreed it was to be Susan—not ma'am."

"Yeah, that's right. I forgot, ma'am—Susan. Well, I guess I better explain what I came over about."

"It doesn't need any explanation, Ed. You're welcome any time."

Ed flushed with pleasure, and became even more confused. This beautiful slip of a girl could get him more rattled than the threat of half a dozen six-shooters.

"But I better explain anyway," he insisted. "You see, I came over on a kind of business visit."

She pouted. "And I thought you had finally realized that it would be fun to come."

He flushed some more and stammered and stuttered until she took pity on him and said, "Oh, don't mind my teasing, Ed. I do it because I'm just as embarrassed as you are. Come on. Let's sit down so we can talk."

Then, after they were both seated, "Now tell me what's on your mind."

FEELING much more at his ease, Ed Brady went into a long recitation of the things that had happened since he had seen her last, leaving out only the last meeting with Ruffer.

Several times she interrupted with questions, and on a few occasions she grew a little red with anger.

"It all fits in," she said when he had finished. "Kelton is trying to run this whole valley, and he'll stop at nothing to gain his ends."

"That's the thing I wanted to find out," said Ed. "Just what do you know about Lew Kelton? You've known him much longer than I have."

"I know that he fought my father the same way that he's fighting you," the girl replied, and the twinkle in her eyes had now turned to a determined look.

"Why?" Ed asked.

"He wanted this ranch, and he still wants it. He thought that once Dad was gone he'd have an easy time getting it, but I've disappointed him, so far."

"Good for you," said Ed admiringly. "But tell me something about it. Did your father have anything at all to do with the bank hold-up? If not, why did he run away?"

"My father never killed anyone in his whole life!" she declared hotly.

"Then why did he run?" Ed repeated.

"Because he wasn't young any more. Kelton had him in a stranglehold, and it was either run or fight. And he was too old to fight."

"I wish I had been here," said Ed.

"So do I," she said. "But you weren't, and there was no one to lead the fight against that beast."

"I'm awfully sorry he left," Ed faltered. "If he had stayed, he might still be alive."

She gave him a quick look. "The report of his death came from one of Kelton's men," she said enigmatically.

"You mean he may still be alive?"

"There's been no proof of his death!"

"But everybody believes—"

"Sure." Her cheeks were reddening again. "Everybody believes what Kelton wants them to. Everybody believes Dad shot a man in the back cold-bloodedly. But that doesn't make it so."

He went over to her and took her tiny shoulders in his great hands. "Susan—you know something you haven't told me. What is it? If we're to beat Kelton, I must know everything there is to know."

She shook her head sorrowfully. "I have nothing else to tell you, Ed."

He looked into her eyes earnestly. "Don't you trust me, Susan?"

"Don't say things like that!" she pleaded. "I'd trust you with anything, anywhere. If there are things that I don't tell you now, it's because I've given my word not to. Please, Ed, don't ask me any more. If I could tell you, I would."

He went back to his chair slowly. "All right, Susan," he said after a moment's silence. "If you can't talk about it now, I won't try to make you. Let's see if you can help me on some of the other problems. What do you know about the White Rider?"

"N-n-nothing at all," Susan stammered.

"Look, Susan, maybe I don't have to tell you this—but I want to be sure you know it. I'm in this fight with you one hundred percent, and any time you need my help, you just yell for me and I'll come arunning."

"Thanks," she answered. "It's good to know you have friends. What do you plan to do now?"

"Well, I plan to go after Kelton instead of waiting for him to come after me. I've got enough on him to hang him, if I can only get the proof of it. I'm going to try to get that proof."

"Good luck," she said. "And be careful. It would be terrible if anything should happen to you."

"I'll be all right," he assured her. "But I'm not any too happy about you being out here all alone."

"Oh, don't worry about me," she replied cheerfully. "I can take care of myself all right. And I am happy now, knowing I'm not alone in my fight."

WHEN HE reached his horse, the old squaw seemed to materialize from nowhere. "Good," she said. "Me listen at door." Her guttural tone was completely unashamed as she confessed to the eavesdropping. "You like her—she like you too. You like to know more about Kelton, you ask in Cochetopa." And before he could ask her for a further explanation, she had glided silently into the house through the back door.

Ed rode back to the Shooting Star in a cloud. The memory of Susan's ready smile and pert little face drove all worries completely from his mind.

"There never was a gal like her before," he told himself. "And I'll bet there'll never be another."

Fortunately his horse knew the trail to the ranch house, or in his daydreaming state he might have ridden miles out of the way without noticing it.

The Judge was waiting for him.

"The boys are coming out tomorrow morning to get their beef out of the canyon," said the little fat man.

"Good," Ed replied. "Did you tell them where the canyon trail leads to?"

"No, I didn't. You said you wanted to settle up with Kelton before we did that."

"Right," Ed agreed. "There's time enough. No use telling everything we know yet. It might come in handy later on."

The Judge nodded his understanding.

"And meanwhile," Brady went on, "if the ranchers are all going to be in the canyon tomorrow morning, that'll be a good time for me to be moseying around town." He told the Judge about Wauhela's suggestion. "If I can get some of the townsfolk to talk, I may be able to fit the pieces of this puzzle together."

"'Tain't no puzzle to me," said the Judge. "Kelton is the answer to all the questions, as far as I'm concerned."

"Sure," Ed agreed mildly, "but the puzzle is—how are we going to prove it?"

CHAPTER XII

ED BRADY had known that the town of Cochetopa looked upon him with suspicion, but it took this visit to make him realize how completely the poisonous tongue of Kelton had isolated him from the community.

At the bar, when he dropped in for a drink, the bartender greeted his friendly talk with grunted monosyllabic answers. People seemed to step into the doorways when he came along, in an effort to avoid him. Some looked significantly at the Colt which hung within easy reach of his right hand as though they were wondering if he had come into town to use it promiscuously.

"The fools," gritted Ed to himself, "to be taken in by lies that way." But a moment's thought told him he was wrong. "'Tain't that they're fools," he amended. "They just ain't informed of the truth. The only news they get is what Kelton spreads around. They ain't got no way of finding out if it's true or not. It's

them that spreads the lies that's to blame—not the ones who believe them."

Suddenly a thought struck him. "Walt Toler, the sheriff, seemed to be a pretty square hombre. Maybe he'll help me."

He hurried down to the sheriff's office and found Toler poring over some pictures of wanted men. The sheriff got up and advanced with outstretched hand.

"Come in, Brady. Glad to see you."

Ed obeyed. "Gosh," he remarked, "those are the first friendly words I've heard all morning."

The sheriff raised a questioning eyebrow.

"The people in town still seem to think I'm a murdering sidewinder. Won't none of them have any part of me."

"Oh, that," said Toler. "Yes—there have been stories going around. I've stopped them wherever I could, but they seem to be gaining ground."

"You don't still think I had anything to do with the Morgan killing, do you?" demanded Ed.

"If I did," Toler snorted, "you wouldn't be running around free. No, I sent Syd Bean to Cerro like I said I would, and he checked on your story. Found eight men all willing to ride over here to swear you were there when you said you were. They all agreed on the hold-up, too. No, Brady, I'm satisfied you were in Cerro when the Morgans were killed."

"Then maybe you can help me." Ed's eyes lighted up at the prospect. "I think I know who's behind all the killing and rustling in the valley. I'm trying to get proof of it."

The sheriff sat up alertly.

"Let's hear your story," he said. "I'm just as anxious to stop the trouble as you are."

ED OUTLINED his ideas briefly; then summed them all up.

"The canyon was what made me sure. That place was used by the rustlers. They ran stock into it from all the ranches in the valley. They had been using the Shooting Star ranch house for their headquarters before I came. My coming put a crimp in their activities. Isn't it natural that they should try to get rid of me? Sure it is," he answered himself. "And who has been behind the attempts to get me out? Kelton, every time.

"He egged on the lynchers; he tried to buy me out—and the dry-gulchers that came after me were his men—the same ones who tried to kidnap me in Cerro even before I started for my ranch. Don't you see, Sheriff, it all points the same way—to Kelton. Why, in the canyon he practically admitted it!"

"You got any witnesses to that?" asked Toler quickly.

Brady shook his head despondently. "I have no proof at all. That's what I'm looking for."

"Well, Brady, the minute you find any, bring it in and I'll act on it. But until I have something solid to go on, I don't see how I can make a move against Kelton. He's a big man in these parts. If I could prove he was guilty, I wouldn't care how big he was, but it's dangerous for me to move against a man like that unless I can prove my charges. He could break me overnight."

"I know," agreed Ed. "I didn't come in to get you to move in on him. I'm just moseying around trying to pick up information here and there. But nobody'll talk to me. scared."

"What do you want to find out?" asked Toler. "Maybe I can help."

"Well, for one thing," said Ed Brady, "I can't figure where the White Rider fits into the whole thing, but I got a notion that he's the center of it. What do you know about that?"

"Not a thing, except the stories of a few people who claim to have seen it. Maybe you're right about it having something to do with the ruckus here, because the first time it was seen was right after the bank hold-up."

Ed looked up. "You mean when old Mr Wells disappeared?"

"That's right," agreed the sheriff. "But when I heard about it I put it down to imagination."

"No, it's not imagination," said Ed.

"Because I've seen it myself, and the Judge was with me—and neither one of us had had a single drink. It's real, all right, and it fits in somewhere, but I can't figure where."

"Sorry I can't help you on that," said the sheriff. "What else do you want to know?"

"Well, if I could make sure of who was living out at the Shooting Star before I came, that would be a kind of proof, wouldn't it?"

Toler nodded. "It would be enough to justify me in questioning whoever it was. It wouldn't prove anything in itself, but it would be enough to get things rolling. But I can't help you on that, either, because I had no idea that anyone was making a headquarters of the Shooting Star. If I had, I'd have raided the place."

"That's the worst of it," said Brady. "The only ones who know about it, I guess, are the ones who were there, and they won't tell 'cause it would put their necks right into a noose if they did."

"Yes," agreed the sheriff. "It's going to be hard to get any proof unless they make a mistake and expose themselves."

ED STOOD up and stretched his long, lean frame, then threw his chin out determinedly. "I'm going to keep trying. Thanks for trying to help. I'll keep moseying around, and maybe I'll run into something."

But he had no success.

He stepped in for a bite at a little hash house, and the waiter-owner gave him a friendly hello. But a moment later he asked, "Say, ain't you Ed Brady?" And when Ed admitted he was, the man retired behind the counter and came out again only to take Ed's money for the food he had eaten.

He tried to get into conversation with the saddle maker with no better success, and the horseshoer acted as though he were deaf and dumb.

A thought of Susan Wells flashed into his mind. "Poor kid," he thought. "This silent treatment is what the town must be giving her since her father lit out. It's hard enough on me, but it must be ten times harder on her. At least I have the Judge to talk to. She has no one but old Wauhela."

He silently vowed that in the future he would spend as much time as he possibly could at the Wells ranch, then felt a little foolish, telling himself, "Brady, you're just looking for excuses to go out there."

The morning was pretty well gone when he decided that further search for evidence was fruitless and that he had best return to the ranch.

"May as well buy some vittles so long as I'm in town and take them along," he thought, and headed for the general store.

Tim O'Shea, the wiry, bristly-chinned little owner, was waiting on a customer when Ed entered, but he hastily dropped what he was doing and came over to greet the new arrival.

Brady was surprised at his cordiality, especially after his treatment by the rest of the townsfolk.

"You wait right here, Brady," said O'Shea, "and I'll be with you in a minute." And before Ed could answer he had bustled back to his customer.

A few minutes later, having completed that job, he hurried back to Ed.

"Well, well, well," he said. "So you're still here. I knew you weren't the kind that could be run off so easy."

"Thanks," said Ed. "But the rest of the town doesn't feel so cordial about it. They seem to wish I would get out."

"Pshaw!" The little Irishman put up a belittling hand. "Think nothing of what they think. 'Tis Kelton's buncombe they've been swallowing. As for me, any man who fights Kelton is my friend. In my opinion, Lew Kelton is the scourge of Cochetopa, and I've seen enough of you to know that you're fighting him—and with more than words."

Happy as Brady was to find someone who did not look upon him as a powderkeg to be shied clear of, his

native suspicion was not allayed at once.

"Why," he asked, "do you call Kelton the scourge of the valley?"

"Because I know the coyote," O'Shea answered vociferously, "and I ain't a man who can be taken in by fine words. And what's more, I know my arithmetic. In my mind two and two makes four, and not five or six or seven like Kelton would have you believe."

"How do you mean?"

The weatherbeaten old Irishman looked around cautiously. No one else was in the store.

"'Tis a queer thing, is it not, that all three men who bucked up against Kelton afore you arrived are gone?"

HE WAITED a moment for his words to sink in, then went on:

"Yes, the banker, and Tom Morgan and Jeff Wells. Sure and the word has gone out that Wells shot the banker, but don't you believe a bit of it. There weren't no hard feeling between them two. It was Kelton the banker was bucking, not Wells. Kelton wanted to have the last say in the running of things, and Banker Ames had the same idea. So Kelton staged the hold-up, and killed the banker, and threw the blame on Jeff Wells so that he had to run away and get himself killed, poor old man. And now Kelton has his way and runs the bank."

"Can you prove what you just said?" Ed asked excitedly.

"Prove it? And what more proof do you need than just to look at the man? That's proof enough for me," replied the fiery little storekeeper.

Ed sat down again dejectedly.

"Yes—maybe for you. But it's not enough for the law. I believe the same way you do, but we've got to be able to prove it."

"Well, all I can say is that if Kelton ain't stopped, no honest man will be safe," insisted O'Shea. "He got Ames and Wells and Morgan, and he's been after you, and I guess if he knew what I had just been saying—" He drew his forefinger across his own throat significantly.

Ed nodded his head.

"You better be careful who hears you when you pop off that way."

"Oh, I don't do it too often, but often enough for him to have heard how I feel about him already. But I ain't no Wells or Morgan or Ames. I may be kinda old, but I still know how to handle myself. Look." And with a quick, catlike motion he was down behind the big cracker barrel that graced the center of the store with the threatening end of a .45 protruding over its top.

Ed laughed. "That's as good a reason as any for Kelton's gunnies to keep away," he said.

THE PEPPERY, likeable little man returned to his stool, and Ed questioned him in much the same way that he had the sheriff. The results were equally unsatisfactory. O'Shea could add nothing to the knowledge Ed already had but his suspicions. Neither could he throw any light upon the purpose or identity of the White Rider.

But when Ed brought up the problem of who had been staying at the Shooting Star, he hit pay dirt—O'Shea turned into a gold mine of information.

"Sure, sure," he cried. "I should have thought of it myself. I know who was there, because I sent out a whole wagonload of vittles for them."

"Who was it?" Ed asked breathlessly.

"What's important ain't who used the stuff," said O'Shea. "That was a coupla strange rannies I didn't know. The important thing was who ordered it and paid for it."

"Who?" Ed's excitement was mounting rapidly.

"Give you one guess!"

"Kelton?" Ed wanted to shake the answer out of O'Shea.

"Nobody else but Kelton!" shouted the storekeeper. "And I hope the information is enough to tie him to a tree!"

"Whoopee!" Ed let out a shout of joy. "That may not be enough to finish him, but it sure is enough to start with. It's the first concrete information I've been able to get, but

it's a good beginning. I'm going to get Walt Toler. You wait here!" And he rushed out of the store and up the street toward the sheriff's office.

Toler was just leaving his office, and Ed called out, "Hold on, Sheriff. I want to see you for a minute."

The sheriff was waiting for him to come up when they both heard a shot.

Just one shot, but Ed felt a sinking feeling in his stomach. Quickly he turned and retraced his steps, running at top speed, with Walt Toler following after.

His worst fears were realized.

Stretched out over the counter, with a widening red splotch staining the side of his shirt, lay Tim O'Shea. It took but a glance to show that the storekeeper was mortally hurt.

"Who did it?" Ed demanded.

O'Shea tried to point to the rear of the store, but there was no strength in his arm. Ed, however, was able to understand the feeble gesture and took a few steps to the open window which looked out on the alley behind.

The alley was empty.

He returned to O'Shea, just as Walt Toler came puffing in, gun out and ready.

They lifted Tim O'Shea and made him as comfortable as they could. Ed ripped his shirt away and bit his lip when he saw the big ugly wound, close to the heart.

"I'm going for the doctor," he said, and started to leave, but Tim's fingers closed about his arm.

"No use," the storekeeper gasped.

Brady knew he was right, much as he hated to admit it.

"Did you see who fired the shot?" asked the sheriff.

"No," admitted Tim. "But it was my turn. Careful, Brady"—his voice was weakening quickly—"or you'll be next."

Then his head dropped back, his body jerked spasmodically and was quiet.

Ed took off his hat, and there was something in his cold, lean face which vowed vengeance louder than any words could.

A crowd had begun to gather, attracted by the shot.

Brady pushed through the inquisitive onlookers and made his way to the alley in the rear of the store, hoping to find some evidence of the murderer, but the most minute search brought forth nothing of consequence.

There were the prints of recent footsteps on the dry brown earth, but they could have been made by a hundred different pairs of feet.

And on the window frame was the mark where, just a few minutes before, the barrel of a .45 had rested before it discharged its fatal load. But all .45 barrels make the same mark, and eighty percent of the men in town carried .45's, so that added nothing to Ed's knowledge.

FILLED with fury at the wanton killing of this harmless old man, Ed strode back into the store.

The sheriff was still there, and the crowd was larger than before. Some stared at Ed coldly; some looked at him askance; for again his presence had brought with it death.

Brady ignored their unfriendly looks and pushed through toward the sheriff. Midway through the crowd was a man who did not make way for him.

Ed raked him with a glance; then his whole frame tensed.

The man had a vicious face, and the most prominent part of it was an ugly mouth filled with jagged, broken-off teeth. Those teeth in that mouth were unmistakable.

This was one of the gunslicks who had tried to take him in Cerro. This was one of the men who had made the drygulching attempt at the Shooting Star. This was one of the men who carried out Kelton's orders.

This was the man, Ed knew instinctively, who had fired the shot which had snuffed out Tim O'Shea's life!

The man, so cocky and self-assured when he blocked Ed's progress, seemed to read the thoughts that were going through Brady's mind, and the jagged-toothed stranger was quick to grasp its meaning.

He lost all his cockiness, and with an apprehensive glance about him attempted to sidle toward the door.

But Ed Brady was too quick for him. His hand reached out and grasped the stranger's vest.

No word had passed between them, but each knew that only one of them would leave that scene alive.

Ed Brady's voice rasped out, and its quality electrified the crowd.

"Stand back, everybody!" he commanded, and they obeyed. The more timid hastened out of doors; the others crowded into the corners and sought what shelter they could find —aware of the danger, but magnetized by the powerful drama which they sensed was taking place.

In a few seconds only Ed and the jagged-toothed gunny occupied the center of the floor. The sheriff moved to join them.

Ed Brady still retained his grip on the other's vest.

"That's Snag Welsher," said Sheriff Toler. "You got something on him, Brady?"

"This man," said Ed Brady, and each word was like a death sentence, "killed Tim O'Shea!"

"You can't prove nothing on me!" screamed Welsher.

"You see, he doesn't deny it!" Ed went on. "Just claims we can't prove it. Well, I think we can. I'm willing to bet your gun is still hot and has one bullet missing!"

"Don't hurt none to check on that," said Walt Toler, and reached for Welsher's gun.

But Welsher's move was quicker than the sheriff's, and his own hand closed over the butt of his .45. There was a dangerous, ominous gleam in his eye as the Colt cleared leather.

The sheriff took a step back and reached a darting hand for his own gun, knowing as he did so that he would be too late.

A shot smashed the tense silence in the room; then echoed and reverberated through the small store, filling everyone's taut eardrums.

A SURPRISED look crept over Walt Toler's face, but it was more than matched by the look of incredulity on the visage of Snag Welsher. The ugly-faced man's gun dropped with a clatter; then he himself collapsed like a sack of potatoes.

Now the sheriff could see what had happened when Welsher had pulled his gun. Ed Brady had used the speed he was noted for. Lacking the time to draw, he had pointed his own gun without removing it from its sheath, and fired. The bullet had torn through the holster, and then through Snag Welsher's body.

The report had been from Ed's gun —not Welsher's.

In the midst of the excitement Brady remained cool. He reached down and retrieved Welsher's gun. The barrel was warm to his touch. He threw it to Walt Toler.

"Here—examine it," he said, "and see if I was right."

Toler too felt the warmness of the barrel, sniffed it and caught the remnant of the still pungent acrid fumes of recently exploded gunpowder. He broke it open and dumped five bullets out onto his broad, calloused palm.

"This gun was fired less than ten minutes ago," he decided. "One shot! And the only shot fired about these parts at that time was the one which killed Tim O'Shea. So I think we've got our man. Get up, Welsher!"

But Welsher did not get up. He was never to get up again.

The crowd looked at Ed Brady with a mixture of fear and awe. There was no question that Welsher had drawn first; that Brady's quick shot had probably saved Walt Toler's life as well as his own. That they had seen themselves, and they understood that Brady had had no choice.

But the fact remained that here was still another death. Death seemed to tag at Brady's heels. To the peace-loving townsmen this was an unhealthy thing. Any man too closely associated with death was to them a menace, and a man to be shunned.

Slowly and unostentatiously they drifted out of the store, leaving Sheriff Toler alone with Ed Brady, the remains of Tim O'Shea and the body of his murderer, so quickly brought to retribution.

Toler put out his hand and pressed Ed Brady's.

"Thanks, Ed," he said simply. "I was right in his line of fire. That would be me lying there instead of him, if not for you!"

Ed grinned grimly.

"I didn't take the time to think which one of us he'd get first," he replied. Then, "That's the second of Kelton's gunnies. But it's too slow this way, Sheriff. He can recruit new men faster than we can kill them. I'm not waiting for them to strike any more."

"No?"

"No," repeated Ed. "The longer we wait, the more killing they get the chance to do. I'm going after them first—instead of waiting for them to come after me."

"You got any plans?" asked Walt Toler.

"Yes—I got some figured out."

"Can I help?"

"No—this is the kind of thing that must be done alone. A posse would spoil it."

"Well," Toler answered, "I got confidence in you, Brady. But I gotta warn you, too. Go easy with the shooting. The folks are worried and upset by it."

"I'll give you my promise," replied Ed, "that I won't start the shooting any more than I did today. But if it does start, I'm agonna be in on it!"

"Guess I can't ask any more than that," said Toler resignedly.

CHAPTER XIII

WHEN Brady told the Judge what he planned to do, the fat little man was plainly perturbed.

"Now looky here, Ed," he said. "Don't get the idea that I'm scared. I'll go anywhere you say and do anything you think is right, but I ain't anxious to mix in with any speerits."

"The only spirits in this neck of the woods," said Ed, smiling, "are those in that long-necked bottle of yours. Any left, by the way?"

"Any left? All left!" boasted the Judge, and he proudly hauled down the full bottle of Mount Vernon for display.

"And you want to hear something good?" the Judge continued. "Ain't I even got a strong desire to start on it any more."

"That's a good sign," said Ed. "Seems like you've cured yourself completely."

"Uh huh—not yet," replied his partner. "That'll only be true when I got strength enough to take one drink and put the bottle back. I'm still afraid to try that one."

"It'll come in time," Brady assured him. "But meanwhile, you've done a swell job. You know how I didn't want you to come along with me? Well, I guess I owe you an apology for that. I'll tell you right here and now—you're as good a partner as any man could wish for."

The Judge seemed to expand with pleasure. "For years I've been trying to win the fight with the bottle, but I never could get up enough strength until you came along and gave me a helping hand and a helping word. So you can be just as proud of my success as I am."

To switch the subject from the Judge's old habits, Ed said, "But about this other so-called spirit, the White Rider. I know you don't care about tackling it, but I know too that you'd go after it with me if I asked you to."

It wasn't a question, it was a statement of fact, and the Judge nodded his agreement.

"However," said Ed, "I figure to wait for it in the dark where we saw it crossing the range last time. There's scarcely enough cover out there for one horse and man, so I planned to do it alone."

The Judge drew a sigh of relief, then almost immediately began to worry. "But, Ed, will it be safe for you? If it ain't a spirit, then it's one of Kelton's men, and those lobos shoot fast. I almost hope it *is* a spirit. I never heard about a spirit shooting anyone."

"Don't worry, Judge," said Ed. "It won't be so easy for the Rider to draw a clean bead while riding and at night. If shooting does start, I'll

have a better chance than he does, because I'll be firing ahead of myself, while he has to shoot behind himself."

THAT evening, as soon as dusk had become heavy, Ed Brady rode the range alone and concealed himself among a cluster of trees almost directly in the path which the White Rider had used.

Ed sat at his horse's feet and allowed himself to doze, knowing he would be wide awake at the first slight sounds of an approaching horseman. Throughout the long night he sat, sleeping in snatches, but there was no Rider to make his appearance.

With the breaking of dawn, Brady made his way homeward to get a few solid hours of rest in his bunk, before beginning his day's chores.

The following night found him waiting in the same place.

This time, little more than an hour's waiting brought its reward. The sound of a galloping horse in the distance reached his ears, and in a second he was mounted and tense, eyes peering into the distance, waiting for the Rider to take shape.

He had not long to wait.

The cool dim light of a million stars soon picked out a white shape that seemed to be drifting toward him.

It was the White Rider, and he was following the trail which would take him close to Ed's place of concealment!

Brady waited silently, patting his horse's neck to allay its impatience. He had laid his plans well. To have exposed himself to the approach of the rider would have made him an open target. Therefore he had decided to wait until his adversary was abreast of him and then execute a surprise maneuver.

The Rider, sweeping along through the night, seemed to add to the beauty and serenity of the range. This spectral white form seemed to give life to the broad, silent spaces.

Ed was waiting—ready. When the form reached him, he dashed out, his horse's head just a few feet from the flank of the White Rider's animal.

"Halt!" he commanded, "and don't try to draw your gun because I've got you covered."

Brady had hardly hoped that the command would be obeyed, so he was not surprised or disappointed when the White Rider spurred his horse into a burst of speed in an effort to draw away.

Step for step, his own mount equaled the speed of the other.

The Rider was lying low over his horse's neck like a jockey on a race horse, to cut wind resistance and also, perhaps, to make the smallest possible target for the expected bullet from behind.

Brady tried to close the few intervening feet, but try as he would, the White Rider kept those few feet of open ground between them.

Ed was forced to unwilling admiration at the way the Rider handled his animal.

"It's going to be a long chase," he thought ruefully, "and if my horse tires before his does, he'll reach the hills in safety."

In complete silence, except for the pounding of hoofs, the two riders sprinted across the range.

The wind blew through Ed Brady's hair and fanned his cheeks, and he felt that great stimulation which comes with the rhythmic swing of a good horse speeding through the beauties of a star-filled night.

Slowly the hills seemed to approach them, and Ed tried again to overtake the flying White Rider, for whatever was to be done must be done before those hills were reached.

For a moment he thought he was gaining, but just for a moment. Then the lead horse began drawing away. Slowly, almost imperceptibly, but surely, it gained.

The few few feet between them became five feet, then ten, then twenty.

ED kept on doggedly, knowing that no horse could keep up that pace for long without tiring badly; but fate seemed to be against him, for there was almost a fifty-foot gap between them when the hills loomed up closely as an inviting shelter for the pursued Rider.

For a moment Ed Brady considered using his gun to halt this headlong flight, then vetoed the idea, remembering his promise to Sheriff Toler.

"I won't start the shooting," he had said, and he intended to keep his word.

He racked his brain for a course of action. In five minutes at the outside, the White Rider would have escaped him, and he knew that that specter was human enough never to take the same trail again, thereby leaving itself open to pursuit.

If he had had his rope at his saddle, it would have been an easy job to have dropped it over the shoulders of his man, especially when they had been so close together. But there was no use thinking of that, for he did not have his rope with him.

He considered using his gun as a missile, with the possibility of hitting and stunning the Rider ahead of him, but that would leave him unarmed against an armed enemy.

He had just dismissed this thought as impractical when something happened to the horse of the White Rider.

He must have stepped into a gopher hole, for without warning he went down, his head turning under and his body following and describing a complete somersault before he landed on his side.

As he went down the White Rider went sailing through the air, cutting a parabola against the blinking stars.

It all happened so quickly that before Ed had fully realized what had occurred, the White Rider had risen, and was running rapidly toward the nearby wooded hill.

Ed Brady headed directly at the misty apparition, and when close enough shifted his weight carefully, then hurled himself through the air at the fleeing figure.

His arms closed around something solid, and they both went down with Brady on top.

Both he and his captive were winded, and the white-sheeted Rider, exhausted almost to the point of insensibility, made no attempt to fight him off.

Close examination showed that the white, specter-like quality of the Rider was obtained by the simple use of a sheet with slits for eye holes.

Ed Brady took one end of the sheet and tore at it vigorously. It ripped clear to the top, and Ed let out a cry of anguish, for there revealed to him, with eyes fluttering and pain-filled, was the face of Susan Wells!

CHAPTER XIV

SUSAN'S eyes closed and she was still.

Ed Brady became almost frantic. For the first time he realized how much this girl really meant to him. He knew that the results of a fall of the sort she had just taken depended entirely on luck. A "soft" landing might mean little more than a good shaking up and a temporary shock.

A "hard" landing might mean anything from concussion to a broken back or neck, or worse. It might even be — he feared to think the word — death.

Nearby he could hear the trickle of a little stream as it peacefully wended its way down the hillside. He hurried to it, and for want of a better container, dipped his big hat into it and filled it to the brim with the cool, fresh water.

Back with Susan, he laved her temples and her face. He tested her head, moving it gently from side to side, and was relieved to find that the motion was normal. No broken neck there.

He listened to her heart and found it strong and steady, and her breathing, though a bit hurried, seemed regular.

"Seems like just a plain lady's faint," thought Ed, trying to comfort himself and calm his worst fears.

He applied more of the cool water, and a moment later was rewarded by Susan's eyes opening.

They stared up at him in frank wonderment.

Then she spoke, and her voice was fully as surprised as her eyes. "Ed," she said. "Ed, dear. How did you get here? Somebody was chasing me and

I couldn't get away. I was so afraid! But now that you're here I'm not afraid any more."

She smiled, and Ed Brady's heart felt so big that it seemed to be pushing its way out of his body through his mouth.

"I'll explain everything," he said. "But first let's see if you were hurt. Can you stand up?"

"I'll try."

His strong arm was about her as she got to her feet, to help if help was needed. But once she was upright, she found she could stand without any trouble, and he heaved a great sigh of relief.

"Anything hurt you?" he asked, still a little anxious.

She tested her arms and legs and shoulders, moving them in every direction, and each motion was normal and without pain.

"Condition perfect," she said pertly, stretching out her arms to show him.

Ed swept her into his broad arms and held her closely, tenderly, and their lips sought each other's in a long, deep kiss.

ED HAD recovered Susan's horse, which had fortunately suffered no more damage from his fall than had his mistress.

While both horses rested and recovered from the strain of their long, hard chase, Ed explained what had happened.

Susan laughed. "So it was you I was running away from! Well, I think I'm glad you caught up with me." She smiled shyly.

Ed Brady was very happy, but he did not allow his new-found joy to interfere with his main purpose.

He gave her a reproachful look and said, "But, Susan, why didn't you tell me that you were the White Rider? It would have saved so much trouble."

"Because"—her face became serious—"it was part of a secret which wasn't mine. Somebody's life depended on my keeping that secret—somebody whom I love very much."

She paused, and he waited. She seemed to be thinking deeply. Then she went on, "There can't be any more secrets between us, can there, darling? No," she answered her own question before he had time to answer. "I trust you as much as I trust myself. We are like one now. I'll never keep another secret from you, Ed Brady."

"But who"—there was a touch of jealousy in his voice—"is this person that you love so very much?"

She looked at him with frank, honest eyes from which all pretense and deceit had been removed.

"My father!" she answered simply.

"Your father!" Ed felt silly repeating the words, but for the life of him he could think of nothing else to say.

Then, recovering from his surprise, "But your father was killed!"

"No, no." She shook her head. "That's the story that Lew Kelton has passed around. Of course, I always knew it wasn't true."

"You're sure of that?"

"Of course I'm sure. I'm sure because I've seen him. In fact, I was riding to see him when you took after me. Perhaps you will go on with me. I'm sure he would like to meet you. He always wanted a son—and now he can have one."

"Yes, of course I'll go. But first won't you tell me the whole story, so that I'll know what it's all about?"

"All right—I may as well start from the beginning. Let's get comfortable, for it will take a little while to tell."

They settled themselves, and Ed built himself a cigarette and puffed contendedly as she told her story.

JEFFERSON WELLS and Lew Kelton had not been friends. Wells had bucked Kelton on many things—the last of which was Kelton's desire to buy the Diamond O. For some reason which she had not been able to guess at the time, Kelton wanted the Diamond O very badly.

Ed interrupted, "Got any idea now why he wanted it?"

"I think so," she answered. "I believe Kelton is involved in some gigantic rustling scheme, and he wanted this whole valley property to carry

it out on a big scale. Then he would have room enough to pull stock from all the hill ranches and have plenty of room to hide them while their old brands were being blotted. That's what I believe now."

He nodded. It fit exactly with his own idea. And the canyon provided a way to get the stock out of the valley without being spotted. That was why Kelton wanted the Shooting Star. It gave him the canyon and prevented anyone from being able to investigate his operations too deeply.

Susan continued her story.

Her father had suspected Kelton's intentions and had openly accused him of crookedness. Kelton had vowed revenge.

The next day the banker had been killed while Jeff Wells was in the bank with him alone, *in practically the same way that Tim O'Shea had been murdered.* The same method that had been used against Ed in the Morgan killing was used against Jefferson Wells. A crowd collected. Lynch spirit was around. The old man, seeing the bad spot he was in, had reached his horse on the run. Someone in the crowd had shot at him, and just missed him.

He had come home, told Susan what had happened, sworn his innocence, and then made for a deserted old cabin in the hills where he had been in hiding ever since.

At first he had intended to stay but a few days until a calmer spirit prevailed in the village. He hoped that Sheriff Toler, knowing the type of man he was, would institute a search for the real killer. Indeed Toler had begun to do just that.

Then Kelton's men had spread the story of Well's death in a drunken barroom shooting.

It had served two purposes. The investigation had ceased, and it remained unsafe for Wells to leave his retreat; now the whole town believed him guilty, and as soon as he put in an appearance he would be doomed.

WITH Jeff Wells out of the way, Kelton had tried to force Susan to sell the Diamond O, but she had steadfastly refused.

Her only f r i e n d, surprisingly enough, had been Al Ruffer, who did care for her in his own bullying fashion. He had been the one buffer between herself and Kelton.

The town had ostracized her, treating her as the daughter of a cold-blooded, self-confessed murderer, for they had taken Wells's flight as evidence of his guilt.

The coming of Ed Brady had changed everything.

The attempt to frame and lynch him for the killing of the Morgans had so closely paralleled the banker's killing that people were beginning to wonder if both had not been engineered by the same brain. And now the murder of Tim O'Shea was doing more to increase their doubts. All three killings bore such a marked similarity.

Ed's arrival, too, had served to take up so much of Kelton's time that he had not bothered Susan in weeks.

Ruffer, sensing in Ed a serious rival had become petty and antagonistic and had been making veiled threats of late.

"But the White Rider?" asked Ed. "Where does that part fit in?"

"Oh, that," she replied. "Since I've been a child there's been a superstition about the White Rider—the ghost that rides when trouble's afoot. I merely made use of the old wives' tale, so that if anyone happened to see me while I was riding to see my father they wouldn't get suspicious."

"And it was very successful, too," laughed Ed. "Even the Judge was sure it was a ghost. He wanted to leave Cochetopa on account of it."

A few more questions, a bit more information exchanged, and they both had a clear picture of what each had known individually.

"You know what?" said Ed. "I wouldn't be surprised if what your father knows, added to what we know, might not be just what's needed to swing Kelton from a tree."

She nodded. "Dad knows a lot about Kelton's operations. I tried to get him to tell me, but he wouldn't for fear that I might act on it and get in trouble. But he'll tell you."

"How do you know he will?"

"Because he likes you."

"Likes me? How can that be? He's never even seen me."

"No," she agreed. "But he knows about you just the same."

"Oh—I think I see. What did you tell him?"

She blushed, then said boldly, "I told him that you were brave, and honest, and strong, and handsome, and that I loved you and was going to marry you."

And she jumped nimbly on her horse and dashed away, laughing, with Ed in pursuit.

When his horse was abreast of hers, he asked, "When did you tell him all those things?"

"Right after the first time I met you," she replied.

"And what did your father have to say about it?"

"He said he had full confidence in my judgment, and if you were only half the man I made you out to be, he'd welcome you as a son."

"I hope," said Ed, "he won't be disappointed."

"He won't," said Susan with the full confidence that all girls possess that the man they love must be irresistible.

THEY rode deeper and deeper into the mountainside forest, pushing their way ever upward.

The starlight was blotted out by the ceiling of overhanging branches, but Susan never hesitated. She seemed as much at home here as on her own ranch land.

With a sure hand she guided her horse upon the dim and narrow trail, which sometimes disappeared altogether.

When there was room for it Ed rode by her side; when the space was insufficient he followed directly behind.

They had neared the top of a crest and were crossing an open space when Susan grasped his arm.

"Listen!" she said. "Did you hear something?"

They were still for a moment; then a repetition of the sound floated to their ears. It was the sharp crack of a gun!

There was horror in Susan's eyes as she cried, "It's shooting. From the cabin. They've found Dad. Hurry!"

She pushed her horse ahead at the greatest speed possible, Ed staying close by. The shooting continued and came closer.

"At least they didn't surprise him the way they did the Morgans,." Ed thought. "He seems to be holding them off. Maybe we'll still be in time."

They were, for when they reached the little clearing in the midst of which stood a log cabin, three men were trying to batter down the door, which was bolted from inside.

So intent on their purpose were they, and so noisy about it, that they had not heard Susan and Ed approaching.

ED MOTIONED for the girl to dismount silently, and then they took up positions behind trees, covering the doorway, but from different angles.

Ed called loudly, "Come away from there with your hands up."

The three men whirled.

One dropped to the ground to avoid bullets, the other two had their guns blazing as they turned.

They aimed at the source of the voice, but their bullets dug harmlessly into the tree-trunks.

"Wel," said Ed, "I don't see as how I have any choice. They sure started it, so I'm not breaking my word to the sheriff."

He carefully pointed his Colt and pulled the trigger. Once! Twice! The red flashes darted mercilessly toward the men who had fired at him.

At the same time Susan's gun spoke. She was not going to stand by idly and see her man endangered without doing anything about it.

After the first volley there was no one standing near the door. All three men were down, but the one who had dropped of his own accord was crawling away under cover of darkness.

Ed looked sharply, trying to pierce the night with his eyes, but could make out only a huddled mass on the ground.

The man who had crawled away

had reached the safety of the corner of the cabin, but neither Ed nor Susan had any way of knowing this.

Using the trees for shelter, Brady glided over to where the girl was hidden. "You wait here," he whispered. "I'm going out to investigate."

"No, no," she protested. "They still have their guns. You'll be killed."

"But we have to find out about your father," he insisted. "You can keep me covered. If anyone fires you'll be able to stop him. But for heaven's sake, stay behind this tree. I don't want anything to happen to you."

"All right," said Susan. "But be careful."

Ed Brady began to crawl toward the cabin. Snake is more the word for his movements, for at no time did any part of his body raise more than an inch or two from the ground.

Inch by inch, head down but eyes sharp, he drew closer to the cabin. He heard a moaning sound coming from the huddled mass on the ground. Obviously at least one of the gunnies was still alive.

Ed's gun was tightly gripped in his outstretched hand, and pointing directly toward the fallen men.

Lucky it was so, for suddenly from the ground came the flash of a gun which showed that Ed had been either seen or heard. The roar of Brady's gun followed so closely that the shots sounded as though they had been fired simultaneously.

Susan, seeing the exchange, held her fire, for fear of hitting Ed in the darkness. She was driven half out of her senses at having to stay behind a tree impotently while Ed Brady was being shot at, and had just decided to make a dash for the cabin when something happened.

THE man hidden behind the house had aimed at the flashes near the door and fired. Though hidden from the front, he was open to Susan's fire, and she quickly took advantage of it.

A piercing shout was the reward for her first shot. Then she heard the thump of a gun falling to the ground and the footsteps of a man running.

A moment later the beating of a horse's hoofs sounded.

She realized that she had heard nothing from Ed's location for a while, and anxiety overcame her caution.

"Ed," she cried out, "Ed—are you all right?"

"All right, dear," the words floated back thinly.

She dashed to the cabin. Just as she reached it, the door opened and her father, who had recognized her voice, stood framed in the doorway.

He carried a light which showed Ed Brady sitting on the doorstep, while at his feet lay two men sprawled in the grim and incongruous attitudes of death.

But the thing which made Susan Wells's heart almost stop was a stream of blood which flowed freely from Ed Brady's side.

"Ed!" the girl cried with a sob in her throat. "You're hurt!"

"It's just a scratch," he belittled, but the paleness of his cheeks and the free flow of blood seemed to belie his words.

"Let's get him inside, Dad," said Susan, taking command of the situation, "and see just how bad it is."

Ed Brady had doubtless been weakened considerably by the loss of blood, but he could still rise and navigate under his own steam.

Inside, Susan sat him in a chair and, without asking any questions, proceeded to rip his shirt off.

She paled when she saw the wound.

The bullet seemed to have plowed down the length of his arm from near the shoulder as far down as the elbow, and the blood flowed profusely.

"First thing is to stop that flow of blood," said old Jefferson Wells.

He ran to a corner and returned with a piece of bandage and a stick, from which he made a tourniquet.

Susan meanwhile had been heating some hot water, and as soon as the bleeding was staunched, she cleaned and dressed the wound.

Then she sat down, pale and frightened, and said, "Oh, Ed, just a few inches to the right and that bullet would have gone through your brain

instead of your arm. I shudder to think of it."

"Gosh now," said Brady, "why think of it that way? Why not think that if it had been less than a half inch more to the left, the bullet wouldn't even have touched me?"

Then for the first time he became aware of the fact that Mr Jeff Wells was looking him over carefully.

"Howdy, sir," Ed said. "I am sorry we didn't get acquainted under happier circumstances, but those lobos didn't give us much of a chance. I'm Ed Brady, and I'm hoping to get your consent to marry Susan just as soon as we can clear up the mess we're in."

THE old man came forward. His face was clean-shaven and his mouth was wide and humorous. A cap of silver hair gave him an air of regality.

He grasped Ed's right hand and pressed it firmly.

"My daughter has been telling me about you, Brady," he said, "and I must admit I thought her reports were just a mite exaggerated. But from what little I've seen of you, I guess maybe she was right and I was wrong. Anyway, I know that if you had arrived five minutes later, your future father-in-law would have been extinct."

Ed was embarrassed.

"It wasn't my doing that we got here in time," he said. "I was just coming along with Susan when we heard the shooting."

"Well, there aren't many young fellers would tackle three armed gunnies single-handed—" the old man started.

"Single-handed!.." Ed was indignant. "It wasn't nothing of the kind. Susan did most of the important work."

"And there's even less of them," the old man went on, ignoring the interruption, "who would be modest about it."

Brady tried to get away from the praise by changing the subject.

"I came out to see you, sir, to find out if you can help me to get any proof against Lew Kelton. I suspect him of every crime from rustling to murder, but so far I haven't been able to get any real evidence against him. Can you help me?"

The silver-haired old man paced up and down the room for a moment, then came and faced Brady.

"Son," he said, "I've known some things about Kelton for a long time, and I've suspected others. I've never spoken to anyone about it, because Kelton is a hard man who stops at nothing. I used to think that the safest course to take was to keep my mouth shut and say nothing—hoping that Kelton would keep away from me and mine. But I can see now that that was a mistake. I couldn't be in a worse position today even if I had fought him openly from the start.

"Because I didn't take a stand, Kelton became stronger and stronger, until I didn't have a chance. He tried to frame me for Banker Ames's killing; then one of his men shot at me from the crowd. And now they seem to have discovered where I was hiding. So it appears there's nothing left for me to do but fight. I'll tell you anything that will help you, if I know it. You ask the questions, and I'll give the answers."

"Good," said Ed. "That's what I had hoped for."

CHAPTER XV

THE INFORMATION elicited by Brady from Jefferson Wells coincided in almost every point with Susan's story—but there were more than suspicions in the old man's tale, and there were also several additional points of interest.

One of these was the fact that Al Ruffer was definitely a henchman and partner of Lew Kelton.

As proof of the statement that Kelton was heading large scale rustling operations which he had planned to increase to tremendous proportions, Wells averred that Kelton had offered him, Wells, a partnership in the deal for the use of his land.

The old man's refusal was the signal for the beginning of his persecution.

"But," put in Ed Brady, "if you told this story publicly, Kelton would claim that you're just trying to get out of the blame for killing Banker Ames by shifting it on to him."

"That's how I figured it in the be-

ginning," agreed the older man. "That's why I ran instead of fighting. But I can prove what I say! You see, there was another rancher to whom Kelton made the same proposition."

"Now," said Ed, "we're getting somewhere. This is just what we need. Who is the other rancher?"

"He's an old friend of mine down at the other end of the valley. Kelton wanted his land, too, because that would give him control of the valley from end to end. His name is Tom Morgan."

Ed's face fell so noticeably that Wells asked quickly, "What's the matter? Is something wrong?"

Brady looked at Susan.

"I never told him," she replied in answer to the look. "They were such good friends. I didn't want to hurt Dad. But he's got to know some time. Dad"—her voice was gentle—"Tom Morgan is dead. He was killed on the very night Ed came to Cochetopa."

The old man seemed stricken.

Then he asked in a quavering voice, "Is Mary Morgan holding up? She loved him so much. Life will be very hard for her alone."

"She didn't suffer at all, Dad," Susan consoled him. "She went with old Tom."

Jefferson Wells looked straight ahead of him for a moment, then drew in his breath deeply and said, "And I thought I could run away from it all."

"Kelton has done a thorough job of getting rid of his opposition," said Ed. "And the way matters stand now, we're not much better off than when we started. However, one thing has changed, and that is that you're not safe out here any more. Now that they know where you're at, they'll never stop until they get you."

"Ed's right, Dad," agreed Susan. "We'll have to find another place for you to stay."

THE old man seemed to have aged twenty years since receiving the news that his best friend and only witness was dead.

He threw out his hands in a despairing gesture.

"What's the difference?" he said. "Here or somewhere else—Kelton will get me in the end."

"Why, Dad," said Susan in a shocked voice, "what a thing to say. You're licked already if you feel that way. But we're not licked yet, are we, Ed?" She turned to Brady.

"Not by a long shot!" he replied firmly. "And we're not going to be, either. Since I've been in town Kelton has had four of his gunners killed, and we know for sure what he wants. I call that progress. There's only one more step, and that's to pin him down. No sir! I'm not giving up. I'm going to get Kelton, and pretty soon, at that!"

Susan was beaming.

"You see, Dad? It's no time to start feeling discouraged. The real fight is just beginning."

The old man perked up considerably.

"You really think we got a chance?" he asked.

"Why, sure," Ed Brady insisted. "And more than a good chance, at that. But even if we didn't, I'd fight anyway. This ain't just us; this is the fight of the whole valley against the terror of a bullying murderer. By not fighting, we lose anyway. So what do you say, Mr Wells? Will you stick with us?"

There was a suspicious moistness at the corners of the old man's eyes as he answered, "Son, I'm with you right to the end, and I want you to forget what I said before. This is no time for feeling old and discouraged."

"Swell, Dad," approved Susan, jumping up. "And now I think we had better get out of here. The gunman that got away might come back with reinforcements."

As they left the cabin, she pointed to the forms of the two men who had been shot and gave Ed an inquiring look.

"Strangers," said Ed tersely.

"Should we—just leave them like that?"

"The ones who sent them know they're here. They'll be taken care of," he replied.

They rode down through the heavily forested hillside without interruption. Ed was thinking as he rode.

When they reached the open

range, he said, "I think the best thing would be for Mr Wells to come to the Shooting Star. Nobody will think of looking for him there, and even if they do, we'll be ready for them."

Susan agreed, but the old man protested. His spirit returned, he wanted to carry the fight to the enemy.

"Why shouldn't I ride right into town and give myself up to the sheriff?" he demanded. "When the trial goes on, we can break the whole story and blow Kelton and his gang sky high."

"Because in the first place, you probably wouldn't live to speak to the sheriff. The attack on your cabin shows that they're out to get you. That means orders to shoot on sight. In the second place it's nothing but your word against Kelton's. There must be someone who will back up your statements—but if you speak before we find that person, Kelton will get rid of him sure. No, Mr Wells—the best thing is for you to lay low for a while, and the best place for you to do it is at the Shooting Star."

It took some argument to convince Susan's father, but in the end he gave in. They crossed the range by the long route, dropping Susan at the Diamond O; then, after a touching good night, Ed and Wells retraced their steps to the Shooting Star.

THE Judge was still up and pacing the floor anxiously.

"There you are!" he cried. "I've been sitting here lambasting myself for hours for letting you go alone." Then, noticing Ed's bandaged arm, "I knew—I knew it. You ain't no more to be trusted out alone than a baby. Is it bad?"

Ed knew that the sharpness of his tone was caused by worry, so he grinned and answered, "Naw—'tain't nothing but a deep skin scratch."

"How can it be a skin scratch if it's deep?" demanded the Judge.

"Well, I mean it didn't cut no bone, nor anything like that. Just a nuisance, but not dangerous."

"And is that why you're so pale? You look like as if all the blood has been drained out of you. You come inside and I'll pour you a good stiff drink. That's what you need."

Ed laughed.

"Why, Judge," he said, "you're acting just like a hen does over her little chicks. You're so upset you haven't even noticed that we got company. Mr Wells, I want you to meet the Judge."

The two older men exchanged greetings; then the Judge said, "Mr Wells looks almost as bad as you do, Ed. Go on in, both of you, and I'll take care of your horses."

A few minutes later, inside the house, the Judge brought down his cherished long-necked bottle of Mount Vernon, filled two brimming glasses and set them before Ed Brady and Jefferson Wells.

"And while you're drinking," he said, "you can tell me what happened. You start out by trying to capture a ghost of a rider and then calmly come back with a man who was killed in New Mexico weeks ago. It ain't respectable. So you better tell me all about it."

"Pour a drink for yourself, too, Judge," suggested Ed. "You look like you need it."

"All right," he agreed. "I got to test myself some time."

He brought out another tumbler and filled it carefully, then restored the cork to the bottle with a smack.

Ed related everything that had happened since he had left the ranch.

Several times during the story, the Judge's hand reached toward the bottle to refill his empty glass, but each time he withdrew it before it reached it's goal.

When the story was finished and a few questions asked and answered, the Judge took the bottle and with a firm step set it back on its shelf.

Ed looked at him proudly, and the Judge had a light in his eyes and lift to his shoulders that made him seem like a new man.

His glance caught Ed's, and for a moment they locked. In that moment, without speaking a word, they both knew that the Judge had become a self-respecting man again.

They fixed up a bunk for Jeff Wells, and turned in to get some much needed rest before the sun

should bring a new day with new problems.

CHAPTER XVI

THE JUDGE and Ed Brady were astride their horses the next day, discussing plans for bringing things to a head.

They agreed on the need for positive action, before Kelton should have a chance to strike again, but just what that action should be was the point of discussion.

As they talked they saw a rider approaching.

"Looks like Al Ruffer to me," said Brady, squinting through the sunlight.

"He wouldn't dare," said the Judge, "not after what happened to him last time."

But as the horseman came closer they saw that Ed was right.

Ruffer pulled in his horse in a cloud of dust, and his face was distorted with rage. The man was so furious that he forgot his natural cowardice.

He pointed an angry finger at Ed.

"Brady," he shouted, "you've gone too far. I'm agonna get you for this."

Ed was honestly surprised.

"What's eating at you now, Ruffer?" he asked.

"You know what's eating me," Ruffer shouted. "It's Susan Wells. But I'm warning you, Brady, you can't get away with it!"

Ed was no longer casual.

"So long as you've brought Susan's name into this," he said icily, "you better explain just what you're talking about."

Had Ruffer been cooler he would have recognized that icy tone and known it was time to beat a hasty retreat, but his fury drove him beyond the bounds of common sense.

"As if you don't know what I mean," he sneered. "I mean Susan and you. Susan was my gal before you stuck your nose into our affairs. I was gonna marry her. Know what she says now? She says, 'I won't marry you, Al Ruffer, not now or ever.' Then she tells me to get out of her house! Chasing me out of the house after all I've done for her! And it's your fault, Brady. But you won't get away with it."

Ed softened a little. He could understand how any man would feel badly after being turned down by Susan Wells.

"Gosh, Ruffer, I'm sorry," he said, "honest to gosh I am. But I can't help it if the gal didn't choose you. I don't blame you for feeling put out, but you hadn't ought to take it out on me—or on Susan either, for that matter."

"Oh, no?" shouted Ruffer. "That's how you think, but I think different. She only turned me down on account of you, but I'm warning you again, Brady, you ain't never going to get her."

"That's up to her," said Ed shortly.

"Mebbe so—mebbe not!" replied Ruffer and, digging his spurs into his horse, dashed off.

THEY watched him growing smaller in the distance; then Ed Brady said, "I wonder just what he meant by that?"

"Why, that was just one more threat against your life. He meant that he'd kill you before you had a chance to marry Susan," answered the Judge.

Ed scratched his red head doubtfully.

"I sure hope you're right," he said soberly.

"Of course I'm right," the Judge replied. "What else could he mean?"

"I sort of felt"—Ed hesitated—"that the threat might be aimed against Susan."

"That yellow bully!" The Judge's tone was acid. "He wouldn't dare. He knows he couldn't escape you anywhere on the face of the earth if he laid a finger on her!"

"Just the same," said Brady, "even a yellow curdog can be dangerous when he goes mad. Yes sir, Ruffer could be really dangerous."

Then suddenly his face lighted up and his eyes began to sparkle.

"Judge," he cried, "I think I've got it."

"Got what?" inquired the startled Judge.

"The way to hog-tie Kelton!"

"Well, don't keep it to yourself," the old man demanded. "Let's hear it."

"Through Ruffer! Ruffer can be dangerous to us, all right—but he can also be dangerous to Kelton. He could be our witness against Kelton."

"But he's in cahoots with Kelton!"

"What of it? His kind will always give in under pressure if it'll save his own skin. All we'd have to do would be to put the pressure on him and make him believe the game was up. He'd talk so much we'd have trouble stopping him."

"I don't know." The Judge was dubious. "But I don't see any other way, so it's worth a try. What have we got to lose?"

"Nothing at all," said Ed exuberantly, "and we got everything to gain. For the first time I feel that we're getting somewhere. But," he added cautiously, "we got to be careful of one thing—"

"What's that, Ed?"

"We mustn't get into a spot where we have to shoot it out. If Ruffer gets killed, it won't help us any. A dead witness can't testify."

"What you figger we had ought to do?" asked the Judge. "Just go and get him?"

"No," answered Ed, thinking ahead as he spoke, "I am going to see Walt Toler first to let him know what I'm planning. You stay here to see that nothing happens to Jeff Wells. Soon as I get things arranged with the sheriff, we'll get Ruffer and start squeezing him."

AS BRADY galloped toward Cochetopa, he felt lighter than he had for a long time. At last he was engaged on a definite plan of action. No more waiting—no more wondering where the lightning would strike next. From now on he meant to be the lightning, and let Kelton beware.

He slowed his horse to a canter as he entered the town, and headed for the sheriff's office.

He tied the horse to the hitching post and was about to enter when out marched the very man he had been thinking of.

The marks of his beating had worn off Kelton's face, and he had a smug, self-satisfied look about him.

When he saw Ed Brady his lips drew back into a snarl and his two fang teeth protruded, giving him a wolfish appearance.

Both men surveyed each other, stiff-legged and alert for any move on the part of the other. The slightest spark here could ignite a tremendous flame. The air seemed to crackle with charged electricity.

Ed Brady, although ready for any eventuality, made no move for his gun, for he still felt bound by his promise to the sheriff.

Kelton, on his part, had heard stories and had seen for himself evidence of Ed's speed on the draw, and his instinct of self-preservation told him he would be wise to avoid shooting, if possible.

For a moment they were as tense as two animals stalking each other; then gradually both of them seemed to realize that this was not the moment for a showdown, and both relaxed slightly. Kelton's snarl turned into a sneering grin.

"Looking for me, Brady?" he

"Not yet, Kelton, but soon." Ed's voice carried assurance.

Kelton stiffened again, as though thinking that this might be the best moment after all, but the calm look in Brady's eye and the tightness about his lips made him think twice.

"All right, Brady," he said, and the snarl was in his booming voice again. "You come for me any time you have a mind to. I'll be waiting for you."

He sidestepped Ed and walked off down the street.

ED BRADY stood watching him for a moment, then entered the sheriff's office.

"Nice company you have," he said.

"As a matter of fact, he came to complain about you," said Walt Toler.

"Is that it? What have I been doing now?"

"According to Kelton, you raided his Bar K ranch last night and shot up the place. Two of his rannies were killed."

Ed Brady looked at the sheriff with steady eyes.

"Do you believe that, Walt?" he asked. Toler fidgeted uneasily.

"I'm caught between two fires, Ed," he said. "Both you and Kelton are accusing each other of all sorts of things."

"Out with it, Walt," Ed demanded. "Were you planning to act on Kelton's charges?"

The sheriff grinned. He hopped to his feet and walked to the door, opened it quickly and looked out. No one was there.

"Just wanted to be sure," he said, "because I wouldn't want him to hear what I got to say."

"What did you promise him?" demanded Ed insistently.

"Exactly nothing," replied Toler, "but I used an awful lot of words in doing it. I told him I would investigate the whole situation. But tell me, Ed, what did happen at the Bar K?"

"Nothing," said Ed flatly. "I wasn't even near the Bar K. Two of Kelton's men were killed last night, all right, but it wasn't at the Bar K."

"Where was it?"

Ed thought quickly. He had had no intention of revealing the fact that Jefferson Wells was alive as yet. It was bad enough that Kelton knew it. If the sheriff knew about it he might insist upon lodging the old man in jail until he could be tried.

This did not fit into Ed's plans for several reasons. First, he did not want Susan's father to suffer the ignominy of being in jail, and second, he did not consider the jail a safe place. A few of Kelton's gunslicks could crash it and remove a prisoner any time they set their minds to it.

"It was up in the hills," he answered evasively, "miles from the Bar K. They came ashooting. There was three of them. One got away. I was wondering how I was going to be able to prove they were Kelton's men. He gave it away himself, by his story."

"Tell me about it, Ed," said Toler. "I'll have to know all the facts, if I don't take any action. Else I'd be out on a limb for Kelton to saw off."

"Look, Walt," said Ed seriously, "I'm going to ask you a favor. So far you've found that you could trust me—ain't that so?"

"Yes, it's so," agreed the sheriff.

"Well, I'm going to ask you to trust me just a little bit longer. If I give you my word that Kelton's men were killed while attacking me and my friends, won't you just let it go at that for a while?"

"Well, I dunno. For how long am I supposed to stay in the dark about what's going on?"

"For not more than twenty-four hours," replied Ed. "That's what I came to see you about. You can clear this whole business up if you'll work with me."

"What's the plan?"

"Here it is. I've got evidence that Al Ruffer is in cahoots with Kelton on a scheme to rob this whole valley and all the surrounding territory on a bigger scale than you'll ever believe until I prove it to you. Kelton will never confess. He'd stop a bullet first. He's hard. But Ruffer is a different kind of man. He's squirmy and slimy, like all bullies. Give him top hand and he's tough—kick him around a little and he softens up like a sponge in water."

"YOU got both men pegged pretty straight," the sheriff agreed. "What do we do about it?"

"We work on Ruffer!" said Ed triumphantly. "We scare the living daylights out of him. We put the fear of death into him, and he turns yellow and crawls. Then show him a way to save his own skin and he'll give us enough facts to hang Kelton a dozen times over."

The sheriff was rubbing his chin.

"I dunno," he said. "It don't sound entirely legal to me."

"Is it illegal for you to take a man in for questioning?" demanded Brady.

"No—but—"

"Now look here, Walt Toler," said Ed. "I'm offering you a way to clean this county of a bunch of killers and rustlers—a way to do it fast and complete. I'm ready to work with you. But I may as well tell you that if you refuse my offer, I'm going to do it

on my own. This ain't a matter of quibbling over legalities. This is a case of where if we don't get the murderers they get us. And I don't plan to wait for them to do that."

He paused for Toler's answer, but the sheriff continued to rub his chin doubtfully.

"All right, Sheriff. I hate to have to say this. You've treated me square so far, but I can see that Kelton has you bulldozed. He's too powerful for you—too rich! Well, he's powerful and rich because he's crooked, and I mean to stop him. In Cerro, it was the same sort of thing that started the trouble. The law wasn't big enough to stand up against a couple of bullies. When I stood up to them, the law took their side, and I was bucking the law. But in the end the sheriff of Cerro ended up in the same grave with his pals. I hope nothing like that happens to *you*, Toler."

Toler's face was taut as he answered:

"Maybe I deserve that, Brady, but it hurst just the same. You know I'm not throwing in with no crooks. What you forget is that, though to you Kelton is crook number one, to the ranchers hereabouts and to the town folks—and to me, too, for that matter—there ain't a thing against him. That's what ties my hands.

"By all rights I ought to be investigating you right now on Kelton's charges instead of listening to your plans for trapping him."

Ed's face was calm.

"Does that mean, Walt—" he began.

Toler interrupted:

"Now, hold on. It just means I'm trying to explain the spot I'm in. But here's what I'm going to do about it. I'm going to take a trip to Mesa Springs on business starting right now. I'll be back day after tomorrow. If you get Ruffer to talk by then, I'll be glad to listen to what he has to say."

"So you won't work with me?"

"No, but I won't work ag'in you, either. I'm leaving you with a free hand for forty-eight hours. Ain't that enough for you?"

"Well, I'd rather be working with the law than behind its back," said Brady, "even if it has turned its back purposely. But I guess I'll have to make the best of it. So long, Walt. Have a nice trip!" And he abruptly turned on his heel and left the office.

THE three men sat in a dark corner talking in whispers.

"You understand what I want?" asked the largest of the three—and even when whispering the voice boomed, betraying it to be Kelton's.

The two men nodded.

Money passed from Kelton to the others.

"There'll be more when you finish it," Kelton promised.

The men took the money and pushed it into their pockets.

"We'll be back for the rest of it before morning," said one.

"Good," said Kelton. "But remember what I told you. There's to be no evidence, and it's to look as if he started the shooting. A case of self-defense."

"We understand—but it would be easier to plug him in the back."

"No!" Kelton was very definite. "Not in the back. That would start a whole investigation—just what I don't want."

"All right, boss," they answered. "It'll look like he got his after throwing his gun first."

Kelton nodded. "If it isn't that way," he said, "don't come back for the rest of the money."

In a clump of trees which commanded a view of the entrance to the Diamond O, Al Ruffer sat astride his horse, nervously puffing a cigarette, and waiting. He was waiting for the moment when he could be assured of seeing Susan alone, but for several hours someone had been in the house with her. Now the last visitor was gone and only old Wauhela remained. At that moment the old Indian squaw went out the back door with a kindling bag. She was on her way to collect wood. Susan was alone. Ruffer spurred his horse.

Had Ed Brady known of Ruffer's whereabouts at that moment, he

would have saved himself a good deal of searching. But he had no way of knowing, so he covered the town looking for him.

Not finding him in town, Ed headed toward Ruffer's ranch. As he left town he noticed that he was being followed by two men, but he did not give the matter much thought. He was too intent upon his search.

No one at Ruffer's ranch had any idea where Al could be found, either, so Brady decided to wait around for a while, hoping he would come home. He had a hard time concealing his impatience.

After several hours that seemed like days, his patience was exhausted.

"I got forty-eight hours to work in," he thought. "I can't waste them just sitting here. I wonder where he can be."

He began to feel uneasy; then, remembering Ruffer's threat, he jumped to his feet. Suddenly he was worried about Susan.

Without even leaving a message, he jumped on his horse and was off. His uneasiness grew stronger as he rode.

Halfway across the range he heard hoofbeats behind him and, turning, noticed that the same two men who had left Cochetopa behind him were following him again.

This was no longer a coincidence. He stopped his horse, and the two men, instead of approaching, swung to the left as though they were headed for the hills. But soon after he started on his way again he noticed that they had straightened their course and were following him at a parallel.

His inclination was to turn and ride toward them—to find out who they were and why they were trailing him—but he discarded the notion because of the time it would take.

"First I gotta find out if Susan is all right," he thought. "Then I'll look into those two lobos."

He kept his steady pace making a beeline for the Diamond O.

The two strangers were behind him, following as relentlessly as did his shadow.

A short distance out, he saw a figure approaching him. It was on foot, and was running and swinging its arms as though calling on him to stop.

With dismay Ed Brady recognized Wauhela.

He rode up to her and swung down from his horse.

"Susan—" he demanded. "Did

STATEMENT OF THE OWNERSHIP, MANAGEMENT, CIRCULATION, ETC., REQUIRED BY THE ACTS OF CONGRESS OF AUGUST 24, 1912, AND MARCH 3, 1933

Of Ideal Love published bi-monthly at Holyoke, Mass., for October 1, 1944.

State of New York }
County of New York } ss.

Before me, a Notary Public in and for the State and county aforesaid, personally appeared Louis H. Silberkleit, who, having been duly sworn according to law, deposes and says that he is the publisher of Ideal Love and that the following is, to the best of his knowledge and belief, a true statement of the ownership, management (and if a daily paper, the circulation), etc., of the aforesaid publication for the date shown in the above caption, required by the Act of August 24, 1912, as amended by the Act of March 3, 1933, embodied in section 537, Postal Laws and Regulations, printed on the reverse of this form, to wit:

1. That the names and addresses of the publisher, editor, managing editor, and business managers are: Publisher, Louis H. Silberkleit, 241 Church Street, N. Y. 13, N. Y.; Editor, Marie Antoinette Park, 241 Church Street, N. Y. 13, N. Y.; Managing Editor, Lillian Meisel, 241 Church Street, N. Y. 13, N. Y.; Business Manager, Maurice Coyne, 241 Church Street, N. Y. 13, N. Y.

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5. That the average number of copies of each issue of this publication sold or distributed, through the mails or otherwise, to paid subscribers during the twelve months preceding the date shown above is—(This information is required from daily publications only.)

LOUIS H. SILBERKLEIT
(Signature of Publisher)

Sworn to and subscribed before me this 29th day of September, 1944. Maurice Coyne, (My commission expires March 30, 1946.) [SEAL]

something happen to Miss Susan?"

The old Indian was panting and breathless, and though she tried to talk quickly it was a few minutes before her words were intelligible. No wonder, for she had run more than five miles with nothing but thin Indian sandals to protect her feet.

Ed finally got her story out.

She had been gathering kindling. She was near enough to hear funny noises from the house. It sounded like a struggle. She had hurried back. Al Ruffer was riding away, leading another horse. On the other horse sat Susan Wells! Her hands were tied behind her. There was something which looked like a handkerchief tied around her mouth.

"Which way did they go?" demanded Ed.

Wauhela pointed with a trembling finger.

For the first time in his life Ed Brady experienced fear—.

He spurred his horse to its utmost, sparing neither the animal nor himself.

BEHIND him his two pursuers smiled, and one of them said with an evil grin:

"He seems to be headed for the canyon. We couldn't find a better place for our business."

The other nodded.

"Yeah," he said, "the fool is playing right into our hands. Fifteen minutes more and we'll be able to collect the rest of our money."

CHAPTER XVII

ED DID not rein in as he reached the mouth of the canyon, but continued his mad dash over the dangerous loose rocks and boulder-strewn bottom.

Luck, plus the surefootedness of his horse and his own lightness in the saddle, carried them through this potential danger spot.

Around the turn, with firm earth underfoot, he once more used his spurs, and got even greater speed in response.

He was far down the fertile valley

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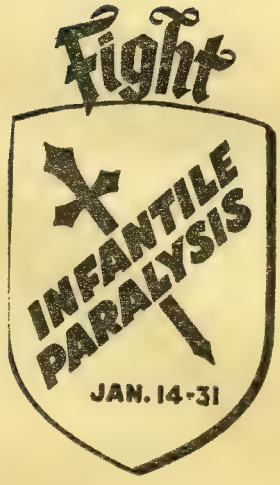

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before the two pursuing gunslicks had eased their horses over the rocks. Once inside, however, they gave chase with full speed.

Ahead, Brady could see the hideaway cavern, up the sheer mountainside, and as he looked he could make out two figures on the ledge. The larger one seemed to be pulling the smaller one up after it.

He passed a silent prayer of thanks.

"Just reached it," he thought. "He ain't had time to do no harm to Susan yet."

A few more minutes of wild riding brought him to a point under the ledge. No sign of life came from above.

He cupped his hands and shouted.

"Ruffer!" he boomed. "Come down or I'm coming up after you!"

A weird mad laugh floated down from above, and Ruffer's voice answered:

"I told you you'd never get her, Brady."

Ed wasted no time. He dashed at the wall and began to climb, tearing his fingers in his haste.

But he had not gone more than ten or fifteen feet when the menacing crack of a gun sounded and a lead pellet tore past him, missing by mere inches.

Ed dropped to the ground.

To have continued would have been to expose himself to Ruffer's fire all the way up the wall—the surest way of getting hit. Brady did not wish to be shot, for if he were it would leave Susan without a protector.

He picked himself up from where he had fallen as he dropped, turned and found himself looking into the two leering faces of the men who had been following him. Each of them held a gun in his hand, and both weapons were cocked and ready for action.

Slowly Ed lifted his hands high.

"Ain't you going to draw, Brady?" sneered one.

Brady did not answer. The two guns were less than two feet from his body.

The gunners could have killed him

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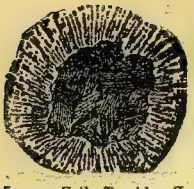

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there and then, but they could not resist the desire to play with their quarry, as a cat might play with a mouse.

"I heard you was a crack shot, Brady," said the second man. "Come on—show us how good you are."

Ed Brady knew he was close to death, but he did not wilt.

"Reckon you got me, boys," he said coolly. "Are you planning to do the job here or take me in for Kelton to finish?"

"Naw," said the first man, "Kelton don't want to show in this at all. We're going to tend to it ourselves."

"Shut up, Jake." The other gunny kicked the speaker. "He's pumping you."

Jake turned to his companion to answer. "Let him pump," he replied. "What good's it gonna do him? He ain't gonna be able to repeat it.'

A FLASH of lightning suddenly struck. It was Ed Brady's right fist, and it landed with the punch of a mule's kick, flush on Jake's jaw. Jake went down like a felled ox.

At the same moment Ed kicked with all the power he could command at the shin of the second gunny and had the satisfaction of feeling his heavy boot go home.

There was a cracking of bone and a shriek of agony as the kick connected and its recipient began to jump up and down with pain. He seemed to forget all about using the gun which was waving wildly in his hand.

Ed bent and took the gun from Jake's unconscious fingers, then, drawing his own, aimed carefully and let one bullet fly.

Unerringly the shot hit the gun in the hand of the second gunslick, and the sting and pain elicited another shriek as the six-shooter went spinning out of his reach.

Ed gathered his gun in also, and grinned at the way the tables had been turned.

A moment before he had been at the mercy of two armed killers. Now he had three guns, and his two attackers were helpless and unarmed.

(Continued On Page 90)

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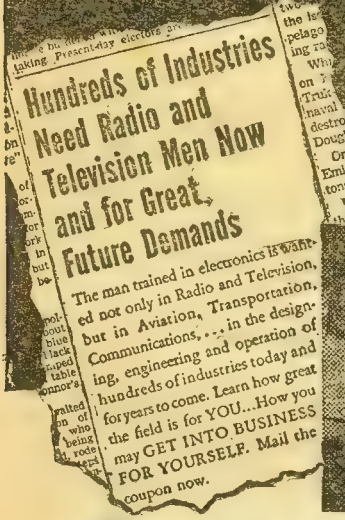
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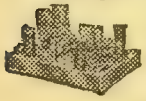

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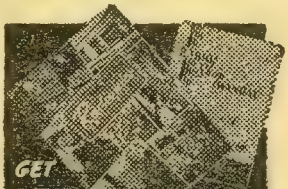
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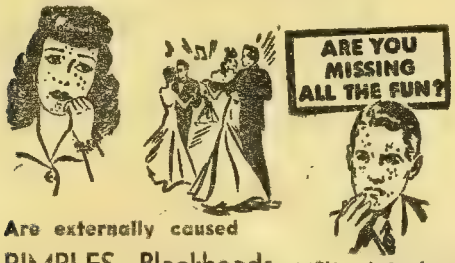

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Complete Cowboy

(Continued From Page 88)

The gunman named Jake was stumbling to his feet and rubbing his pounding head.

Ed covered him with his gun. Pointing to Jake's pal, Ed ordered, "Tie him up."

Jake took in the situation at a glance and didn't take the time or trouble to argue about it.

Ed tested the rope and found it was sufficiently tight to prevent an escape.

As he finished this he noticed a speck in the distance, near the entrance to the canyon.

"Kelton?" he wondered. "Coming to check up on his men—or maybe to meet Ruffer?"

He drew close to the wall to make himself as unnoticeable as possible and watched the speck growing larger, meanwhile keeping Jake covered.

IN A few minutes he heaved a sigh of relief, for he could see that the approaching rider meant help and not more trouble. Even at a great distance the incongruous, rolypoly figure of the Judge was unmistakable.

The Judge drew up, panting and sweating.

"I figgered I'd find you here," he puffed. "Where's Susan?"

Ed pointed above.

"How'd you get here?" he asked.

"I got suspicious when you left in such a hurry. I looked after you and saw you was being followed, so I got my horse and trailed after you. I met Wauhela, and she told me. I figgered I was needed here more than at the ranch, so here I am."

"I'm glad, Judge."

Just a few words, but Ed's gratitude showed through them.

"I tried climbing the wall, but Ruffer's got a gun and used it. I don't see how I can get up from here. What I'm going to do is get above the ledge and drop down. You keep an eye on these two jaspers and if you can, keep Ruffer's attention down here so he won't notice me. All right?"

"All right," answefed the Judge.

Ed got on his horse and dashed

(Continued On Page 92)

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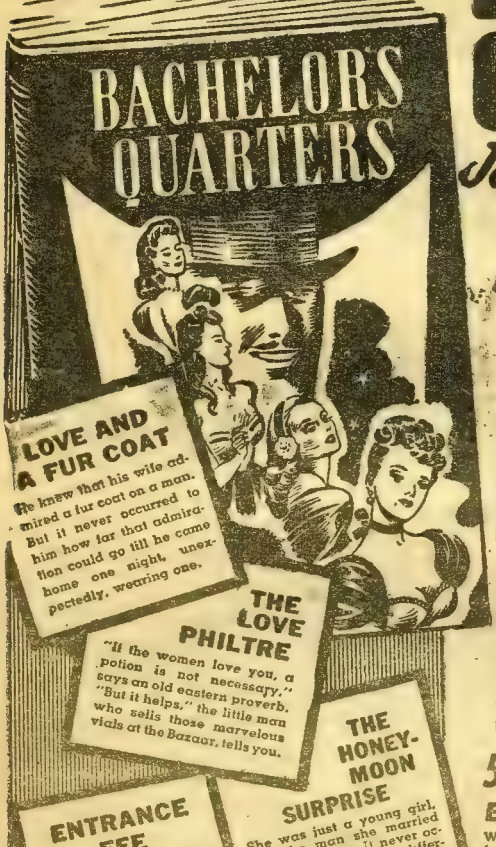
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Complete Cowboy

(Continued From Page 90)

away, seeking a place where he could scale the wall without Ruffer being able to see him.

The Judge looked about him. He had his gun in his hand.

Jake, surly and somewhat afraid, had a new gleam in his eye now that Ed was gone. He felt that the possibility of escape was much better now. The Judge looked so round and soft it was impossible to think of him as hard and tough.

Jake a step in the Judge's direction. He waited to feel out his captor and see how far he could go.

He hadn't long to wait to find out.

With his first step, the gun in the Judge's hand exploded, and the bullet hit the earth at Jake's feet, after plowing through the heel of one of his boots.

The gunslick quickly stepped back.

"Hey, be careful!" he yelled.

The Judge shrugged his shoulders.

"I shore will," he replied.

He examined their surroundings.

The spot in which they stood was under the ledge which protruded from above and therefore out of the range of Ruffer's fire.

"Can't keep Ruffer's mind on us down here from this spot," thought the Judge. Motioning to Jake with his gun, he said, "C'mon over there," and pointed to a spot that was exposed.

Jake opened his mouth as though to protest, then, realizing the futility of it, moved over.

From their new location they could see the side of the projecting ledge and could make out Ruffer's figure on it, waiting to repulse any attack.

They could also see above the ledge to the top of the cliffside. It was to this spot that the Judge's eye went constantly. Finally he saw what he had been waiting for.

Ed Brady's head appeared cautiously over the side.

The Judge was galvanized into action.

"Here you," he called to Jake. "You're going up this wall. Get started."

"Nothing doing!" said Jake flatly. "I'll get shot if I start climbing up there."

"And what do you think will happen to you if you refuse?" asked the Judge. "There's only one difference. If you refuse, you'll be shot sure, but if you go up you may not be hit. I'll stay here and keep a bead on Ruffer, to make it hard for him to take aim. Now, go ahead."

Still Jake made no move to start.

"All right," said the Judge. "You're asking for it," and calmly fired again.

Jake let out a shout and clapped his hand to his head. It came away scarlet.

"Don't get yourself excited," said the Judge. "You ain't been hurt yet. I just nicked the tip of your ear to show you I ain't playing. You gonna start climbing, or do I have to shoot again?"

HE LIFTED his gun again, but it wasn't necessary for him to shoot. He had undergone a great transformation in Jake's eyes. From a soft, round little man, who just couldn't be tough, he had become the very reincarnation of the devil. All he lacked was horns. He would not hesitate, Jake was convinced, coldbloodedly to place bullet after bullet in his hulking frame, if his orders were not obeyed. And Jake's belief was pretty near correct, at that moment.

Jake went over to the wall to begin climbing.

"Just one word of warning," cautioned the Judge, "in case you may have any ideas growing on you. If you give Ruffer the least hint to look above him, you'll not only have him shooting at you, but me, too. If you behave, you may live to be tried for murder, but if you don't, you'll never leave this valley. Is that clear?"

Jake nodded vehemently. He wanted no arguments with this little man who seemed so careless with his gun.

"All right, then—start climbing."

The Judge took up a position behind a tree that gave him a clear view of the ledge and at the same time afforded a maximum of protection, and waited.

As soon as Ruffer caught sight of Jake, he leveled his gun and opened

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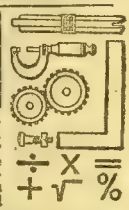

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fire. The sound of his shot was joined by the crack of the Judge's.

Tuffer's shot, fired in haste, cut high above the climbing Jake, letting loose a little swirl of stones and earth which rolled downward. The Judge's bullet creased the top of the ledge, and made Ruffer pull himself back quickly.

Jake let go his hold and dropped back to the ground. He was trembling.

He turned to the Judge appealingly.

"Don't make me climb up there!" he begged. "He's shooting at me."

"Don't cry till you've been hurt," said the Judge unsympathetically. "Start climbing."

Once more Jake began edging his way upward.

Out of the corner of his eye the Judge could see that Ed Brady had tied one end of his rope to a tree at the top of the cliff, and had let the rest of it hang over the side. The Judge noticed fearfully that the bottom of the rope ended more than thirty feet above the ledge. Could Ed drop that distance and retain a sure footing? The ledge was narrow. To miss it would mean to hurtle to the bottom. The Judge shuddered at the thought.

A shot drew his attention to the ledge again. Ruffer was firing at Jake once more.

The Judge returned the fire and watched carefully. If he could hit Ruffer's gun and spike it, it would lessen Ed's danger considerably. Then even if Ruffer discovered Ed before his descent was complete, he could not fire at his helpless, hanging body.

The Judge saw the glint of the sun on Ruffer's gun, aiming at Jake, and fired. A puff of dust less than two inches away from the gun showed that he had missed, but it forced Ruffer to hold his fire for the moment.

ED BRADY, above, thanked his stars that the top of the cliff-side protruded slightly. This put it about even with the ledge and meant that he could stay clear of the side as he slid down the rope. Had the

side slanted outward from the top, he would surely have dislodged earth and stones in his descent and thereby called attention to himself.

Cautiously he slid over the edge and let himself down the rope, hand over hand. He could see Ruffer clearly now, peering over the edge of his hideout, trying to get his sights on Jake, without allowing himself to stray into the Judge's range.

"Good old Judge," he thought. "He's sure keeping Ruffer busy."

He had reached the bottom of the rope, and was almost ready to make his drop. He waited only for the rope, which under his weight was swinging from side to side like a slow pendulum, to get to a central point.

At that moment Jake took his life in his hands with a daring chance. He did not relish being shot by the Judge or Ruffer, but neither did he care for the idea of being tried for his crimes.

If he could furnish a major distraction, he figured, he might possibly make his getaway in the ensuing excitement.

So he suddenly shouted, "Look above you, Ruffer," released his hold on the hillside and began to tumble downward.

Ruffer jerked his head upward and saw Ed.

The Judge took his gun off Jake and covered Ruffer.

Jake landed on the ground but the fall broke his neck.

Ed Brady let go the rope and dropped to the ledge.

All these things happened in the twinkling of an eye.

On the ledge, Ruffer had only time to get to his knees and raise his gun before Brady dropped.

The long fall had two big dangers, aside from Ruffer's presence. First Ed might miss the small ledge entirely; second, it might not be strong enough to bear the weight of his drop from such a height.

At another time these things might have given Brady pause, but not now. Susan was inside that cavern, and there was no risk he would not have taken to reach her.

Ruffer's gun was aimed at Ed, but

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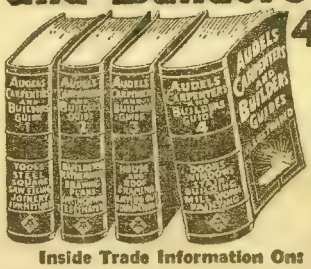

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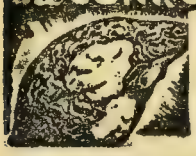

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he did not have the time to put that little pressure on the trigger which was necessary to fire it.

Ed's figure plummeted downward, grazing Ruffer's arm as it dropped and knocking the gun out of his hands.

But Ruffer, now weaponless, still had the advantage, for Ed was near the edge of the ledge and teetering in an attempt to regain his balance.

The bully snapped to his feet and dashed at Brady. One solid push would send him over the side.

Below, the Judge was in agony, for though he had the ledge covered he did not dare to shoot for fear of hitting Ed.

AS Ruffer's rush took him to Brady, Ed lost his footing entirely and began to slide over the edge. He threw out his hands and with a grip of iron caught the arm of the man who was trying to heave him to his destruction.

Ruffer shook himself, trying to loose Ed's hold. He might just as well have been trying to snap a steel band by shaking it.

He swore and shouted. He tried to bring his other arm around so that he might hit Ed and thereby loosen him, but the dead weight hanging onto him prevented.

"If I go," said Ed through clenched teeth, "you go with me."

Ruffer was indeed being pulled over the side too.

He looked downward, and his cowardice came to the fore.

"What should I do?" he shrieked.

"Grab that rock with your other hand," Ed commanded.

Ruffer obeyed, and obtained sufficient hold to halt his sliding.

Ed was quick to take advantage of it. Using Ruffer's arm as he might use a rope, he had sufficient purchase to scramble back on the ledge.

When he had a firm footing, he released Ruffer, and the bully, white-faced and trembling, stood quivering, still not over his fright.

Ed wasted no words.

His right fist came up in a tremendous uppercut that exploded at the point of Al Ruffer's jaw.

(Continued On Page 98)

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(Continued From Page 96)

Ruffer stretched out flat and stopped quivering.

"That'll keep him off my neck for a while," thought Ed, and dashed into the recess of the hidden cavern.

Lying on the floor, like a trussed up bale of hay, was Susan. She was tied hand and foot and there was a gag stuffed in her mouth.

But her eyes were not covered, and Ed could make them out in the dimness, glowing with pride and joy at the thought that no matter what the danger, Ed could be depended upon.

Ed hastily untied her ropes. Just as she got to her feet and began rubbing her rope-chafed wrists, the Judge poked his head in.

"Is she all right?" he asked anxiously.

"I'm fine," said Susan. "No damage at all except chafed wrists and a little skin off my knees and elbows from when Ruffer half pulled and half pushed me up that mountain wall."

Both Ed and the Judge were immensely relieved at her words.

"What'll we do with the polecat?" asked the Judge. "He's stretched out, outside, as though he were enjoying a good nap."

"We're going to make sure nothing happens to him," answered Brady. "He's going to be our evidence against Kelton. How are you Susan? Can you walk all right?"

"Sure I can," she replied. "Look." And she gave a demonstration.

"Good. Then we can hoist Ruffer down and get both him and the gunner I have tied up down below over to the Shooting Star."

"What do you want the other coyote for?" asked the Judge.

"Because he admitted that Kelton had hired him to kill me. Just one more piece of evidence to add to the rope that will hang Kelton."

"I wish Ruffer would wake up so that he could get down under his own steam. I don't hanker for the job of easing him down. The temptation to drop him would be too great," said the Judge.

"Maybe he'll come to in time," hazarded Ed. "Come on. Let's go out and see how he's doing."

Out on the ledge, they stood petrified for a second.

There was no sign of Al Ruffer.

He was gone—completely.

FOR only a second were they stunned; then Ed rushed to the edge and looked over.

"There he is," he cried, "climbing down."

Ruffer was halfway down the cliffside, and on hearing Ed's voice attempted to jump and slide the rest of the way. He landed on the ground in a heap, one leg twisted under him.

"Don't move, Ruffer," called Ed, "'cause if you do, I'll fill you full of lead."

"I can't move," whined the bully. "My leg is broke."

Ed and the Judge looked at each other. Was he telling the truth or not?

"I'll find out," said Ed. "You help Susan down, Judge. I'll go first, so that if Ruffer is waiting for trouble, I'll be able to take care of him."

But when he reached the bottom after a cautious descent, he found that the big bully had not been lying, for his right leg twisted off at a distorted angle.

When Susan and the Judge joined him, they gathered all their horses together and hoisted Ruffer onto one, and the bound gunman on to another. Ruffer's hands were tied securely behind him.

Then they mounted their own horses and led their captives back to the Shooting star.

CHAPTER XVIII

ONCE at the Shooting Star, Ed Brady and the Judge made a quick work of seating their captors, and then tying them firmly to their chairs.

Then Ed turned to his partner and said, "You ride over to Shep Turner's and bring him back with as many of his men as you can round up. Meanwhile, I'll start our friends here atalking."

"Right," said the Judge. "You get

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them talking and I'll bring the audience to listen to them. See that they put on a good show." And he was off.

Brady turned to the gunslick who was Jake's partner.

"Now, my fine lobo," he said, "we'll get down to business. What's your name?"

The gunslick gave no answer. He was biting his lip from the pain of his cracked shin.

Ed looked at him critically.

"Sorry," he said. "You may be the worst coyote on the range, but I guess I ought to ease your pain some before we got into the questioning. Susan," he called, and the girl came running from the rear room where she had been trying to soothe her old father.

"Susan, will you put up some water to heat and bring me some towels, and see if you can find some flat pieces of wood? I'll try to splint up that leg—and Ruffer's too, if I can."

When the necessary implements arrived, Brady went to work with the skill and dexterity which most outdoor men acquire, through the absolute necessity of being able to handle breaks, bruises and burns themselves. When the nearest doctor is a hundred miles away a man must learn to do his own doctoring in a pinch.

In short order the wounds of both injured men were dressed and tied tightly in splints which eased their pain considerably.

The gunny looked Ed in the eye and said, "Thanks, guy. You're square. You treated me better than my boss would have. I wasn't aiming to talk none, but I changed my mind. Ask me anything you want and I'll give you the answers, if I know them. You wanted my name. O. K. My name is Baldy Pete."

Ed looked at the bald head of Pete, which was as hairless and shiny as a billiard ball.

"A fitting name, Baldy." He smiled. "Now tell me—ain't it the truth that that man, Al Ruffer, hired you to kill me?"

Ed's back was turned to Ruffer, so

that only Baldy could see the big wink Ed gave him.

"Yes," Pete lied, "that's the man gave us fifty dollars in advance, with two hundred to come when the job was done."

Ruffer's face went white and he shrieked, "It's a lie! It's a frame-up! I never saw that man before in my life."

"Why, Al"—Baldy looked deeply concerned—"how can you tell such whoppers?"

ED smiled inwardly, but let none of his mirth appear on his face. This was an ideal set-up, and if Baldy would play along with him he knew that Ruffer would break down in short order.

"Stop your squealing, Ruffer," he said. "You'll get your chance to talk soon enough. Now, Baldy, how about the killing of Mr and Mrs Morgan? Who was behind that?"

Baldy nodded his head toward Ruffer.

"He arranged the whole thing," he answered tersely.

"Just what I suspected," answered Brady, and Ruffer let out another howl of protestation.

"How long have you been in town, Baldy?" asked Ed.

"Nigh on to two weeks."

"Then you wouldn't know anything about the shooting of Banker Ames unless you heard someone talking about it, would you?"

The way Baldy picked up cues would have made him a great actor if he had chosen that as a profession instead of the one he had fallen into.

"O' course that happened before I got into town, but I know who done it just the same!"

"Who?"

Just one word was the answer.

"Ruffer!"

"How do you know?"

"He told me!" answered Baldy calmly.

He was in full swing now and seemed to be enjoying his act tremendously. He had immediately spotted Ruffer as a yellow coward, and he got a kick out of watching the

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fear on the bully's face as he writhed and squirmed and shouted and bleated while the charges against him mounted up.

"All right, Baldy; now one more question. Someone got in the alley behind the general store and put a bullet clean through little Tim O'Shea. Got any knowledge of it?"

"Sure."

"Who?"

Once more Baldy Pete nodded toward Ruffer.

"Him," he said.

"How do you know?"

"I seen him do it," was the flat reply.

By this time Ruffer was reduced to a dispirited, gibbering mass. Words kept pouring out of him in a hysterical torrent.

"It's a frame-up. I didn't do it," he kept shouting. "I never saw him before. It's a pack of lies. You're just trying to frame me. I'm innocent. I wasn't anywhere nearby when those things happened. It's a lie—it's a lie—it's a lie—it's a lie!"

"Well," said Ed coolly, "I guess we got all the evidence we need. What with the kidnapping of Susan added to all the other things, we got enough evidence to hang you a dozen times over, Ruffer. So I don't even have to ask you any questions." And he turned his back and began walking away.

"You can't do this to me!" shrieked the bully. "You gotta give me a chance to clear myself. I didn't do none of them killings."

"Save it for the sheriff, Al—that is, if the ranchers don't string you up before the sheriff gets back."

A new fear grasped at Ruffer.

"YOU mustn't let them," he screamed. "I didn't do them things. It was Kelton planned them all, not me. Lew Kelton is the guilty man!"

"That's what you say," said Ed Brady, concealing his elation at Ruffer's breakdown. "But why should I believe you? It was you who kidnapped Susan, not Kelton. I suppose you'd like to lay the blame for that on him, too!"

"No, no," screeched the bully, almost in abject tears. "I took her. But I didn't mean to hurt her none. I wanted to marry her. I've been protecting her from Kelton since her dad ran out. I wouldn't have hurt her for anything."

"Mebbe not—mebbe so," said Ed, "but kidnapping is a hanging crime out here anyway, so what's the difference if you get hung for kidnapping Susan or for killing all the other folk? Your neck is as good as stretched right now."

"But if you don't tell about the kidnapping there won't be nothing against me," pleaded Ruffer.

"Nothing!" snorted Ed Brady. "Nothing except the killing of the Morgans and the banker and O'Shea. Nothing but that!"

"But I didn't!" Ruffer had reached the breaking point. "It was Kelton."

"Baldy here says it was you," insisted Ed.

"I can prove it was Kelton!" cried Ruffer.

"How?" asked Brady alertly.

"I know some of the boys he used; you can question them and find out."

"Better put it all down in writing," said Ed, "and don't miss none of the details."

He fetched some paper and a pencil and untied Ruffer's arms so that he could write. Ed stood close by as the bully frantically scribbled a full statement and signed it.

Ed carefully scanned the paper, and put it into his pocket with a satisfied nod. Then he re-tied Ruffer to his chair.

He went over to Baldy Pete and said, "Good work, Baldy. Now one more question. What would happen if your ropes came loose and you saw a chance to get away?"

"I'd be fifty miles from here by nightfall," he said.

"You wouldn't warn Kelton?"

"Look, Brady—if I had known what a square guy you are I never would have took the job of getting you. And if I get out of this alive, I swear I'll never even pass through the Cochetopa Valley again."

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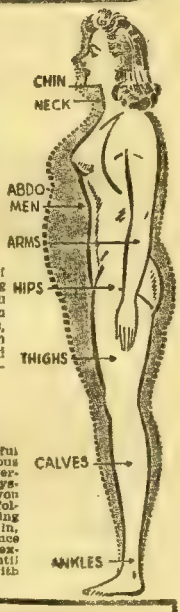

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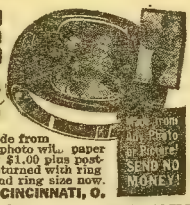

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He opened the knots of the rope that held Baldy Pete and then walked into the back room.

Pete made fast work of freeing himself and hobbled to the door. His progress was slow, but by holding his injured leg up and hopping along on the other he managed to reach his horse.

* * *

Half an hour later, Shep Turner sauntered up with eight of his men and the Judge leading the way. "Kelton's gang ran out on him," said the Judge.

Shep Turner's eyes almost popped out.

"Jefferson Wells!" he exclaimed.

"In the flesh," said the old man.

"But you were killed."

"Come, come, Turner," snapped the old man, "don't tell me you were taken in by Kelton's stories, too."

Jefferson Wells gave a hasty and sketchy outline of events to Shep Turner. Al Ruffer's signed confession was also exhibited.

Brady decided that this was as good a time as any to tell of the canyon trail which cut through the mountains and led direct to Big Horn.

"It's on my land," he said, "but of course it's open for all the ranchers to use. It'll cut shipping costs by almost half."

The other ranchers who had been listening to the story let loose a mighty cheer.

Turner's face was a little red. "Brady," he said, "seems to me we owe you something of an apology."

It was Ed's turn to feel embarrassed. He held up his hand.

"Don't start any speeches, please," he said. "But if I can join the Association and be one of the boys, I'll be mighty happy."

Turner turned to the others.

"What do you say, boys?" he asked. "Should we accept him?"

"Yes!" came back in a mighty roar.

Brady put out his hand, and Turner shook it first, then the others each took a turn at pumping it.

(Continued On Page 106)

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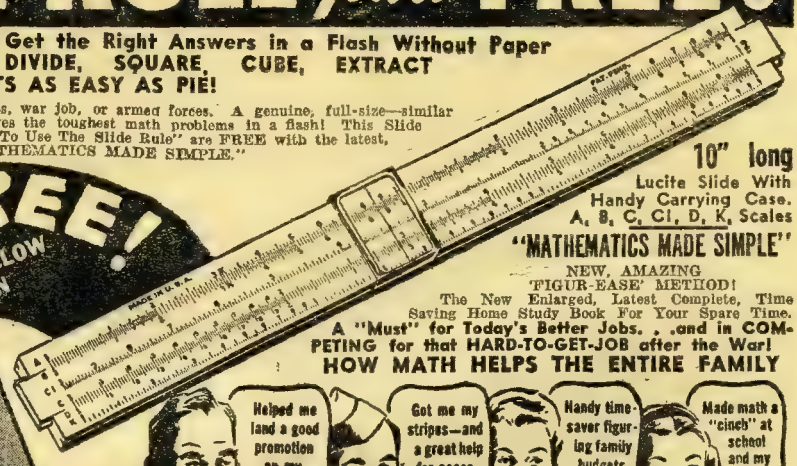

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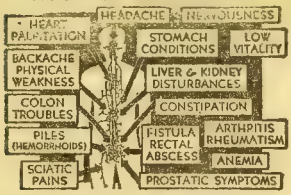

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(Continued From Page 104)

"Only one thing left to do now," remarked Brady.

"What's that?" Turner asked.

"Get Kelton!"

ED borrowed the Judge's Colt; then, after examining it and his own, he put both into his belt and, without another word, went for his horse, leaped nimbly into the saddle and was off.

Brady made a beeline for the Bar K Ranch, but he got there too late. Kelton had left in a hurry, ten minutes before, he was told.

"He's not going to leave the valley without taking all the money he can lay his hands on," Ed reasoned. "That means he'll make a stop at the bank. Maybe I can catch up with him there."

Once more his horse's hoofs flew over the green valley floor, headed this time for Cochetopa. Straight to the bank he galloped and reined in, in a cloud of dust.

A horse was tied to the rail outside.

"I'm in time," thought Ed. "That's Kelton's horse."

He pushed into the bank with long strides, both hands loose and ready to dive for his guns.

The picture that greeted him set him back on his heels in amazement. Kelton, his gun pointed at the quivering teller, was stuffing a bag with bundles of greenbacks which had been set before him. Not satisfied with taking his own money, Kelton was robbing the bank as his departing gesture!

Hearing Ed's footsteps, he swung around, and seeing Brady, blazed away.

Ed dropped to the floor, but as he did so both his guns cleared leather. His first two shots sped on their way before he hit the ground; the others followed in rapid succession.

The roaring of the guns filled the bank, and resounded throughout the town, bringing people arunning.

When the first of them arrived,

(Continued On Page 108)

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(Continued From Page 106)

and it happened to be Syd Bean, Walt Toler's deputy, he found Ed Brady on his feet again with his forehead bloody from a bullet nick across the top of his scalp.

Had he dropped a fraction of a second slower, that bullet would have found his brain instead of giving him a harmless crease.

Kelton was stretched out on the floor with his arms and legs turned in incongruous positions, as dead as a dressed hog.

The teller, still quaking, told his story of the holdup.

Ed did not wait.

Once he was sure that Kelton was dead and that the sheriff's office knew the story, he started back to the Shooting Star.

He whistled happily as he rode, for he knew that Susan was waiting for him there.

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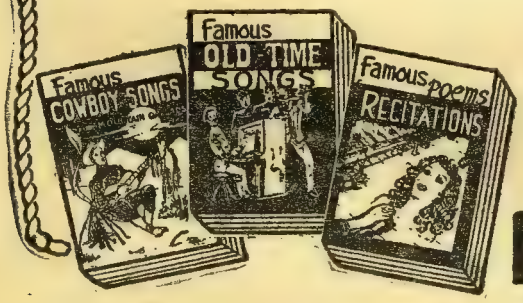

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SPILLING LOOPS

Fact Article

By D. C. Kerr

ROPING, or "spilling loops," was the daily task of the old-time cowboy. In fact, the cow-country waddie would have been as lost without his rope as the trapper would have been without his traps.

In the morning the cowboy roped his horse from the remuda. He used his rope to hold the horse while it was being saddled. In roundup time he used his rope for catching and holding calves during branding. But during the course of an ordinary day he found many other uses for his rope.

Ropes were used for dragging out bogged cattle, and for hitching to the chuck-wagon when an extra pull was needed. They were used in snaking firewood to the camp fire, and for hanging rustlers and horse thieves.

Several ropes could be tied together, and used as a corral for the remuda, the horses quickly learning to stay within the enclosure. Doubled, the rope was often used for killing rattlesnakes.

In the course of his work, or "just for the hell of it," the cowboy seems to have roped about everything in sight.

One cowboy told of roping a big lobo, or loafer, wolf. In a two-mile run he put almost a score of loops over the wolf's head, but the wolf was traveling so fast that he was through the loop before the slack could be taken up in the rope.

At least one Arizona cowboy once lost a valuable saddle by "plaiting his catgut" over the head of one of the camels which Jefferson Davis, while Secretary of War in the Pierce cabinet, imported, then turned loose to shift for themselves.

ANTELOPES were sometimes roped. But that was usually when they had been brought in on

(Continued On Page 112)

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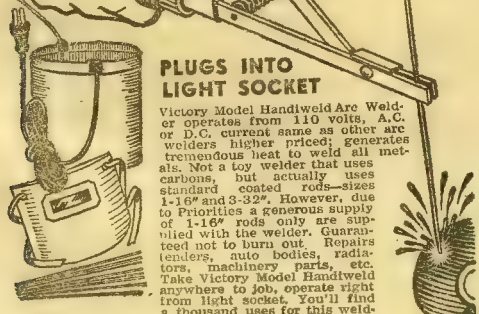

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(Continued From Page 110)

a cattle roundup, and were trying to leave the herd.

Buffalo calves were roped, and usually proved surprisingly docile. But roping a grown buffalo was both difficult and dangerous. This usually had to be done on an up-hill run.

Even wild turkeys were roped, also bob-cats. But the cowboy who roped a bear usually had to either shoot or cut loose. A bear could "climb down a rope" at an alarming rate.

Some of the early cowboys, like Peckerwood Pete, tried lassoing the smoke-stack of early railroad engines. The cowboy's aim was usually true. But the strength of his saddle girth was usually insufficient for the strain that the engine put upon it.

Rope lengths varied from about twenty-five feet to about fifty feet. Some cowboys kept their ropes tied to their saddle horns. Others preferred to keep their ropes free, taking dallys about the saddle horn as needed.

Numerous names were applied to this piece of cowboy equipment. The word "lariat" is a contraction of the two Mexican words *la reata.*

Many cattle outfits furnished their cow-hands with ropes, about the only article, excepting food and horses, that was furnished.

One of the old-time methods of sobering up a drunken cowboy was to "spill a loop" over his head, and jerk him off his horse.

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